

The New Criterion

May 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1

The future of the European past, IX
by Hilton Kramer, 4

C. J. Herington: an homage *by Roger Kimball, 12*

The Smithsonian today *by Heather Mac Donald, 17*

Letter from Moscow *by Christian Caryl, 32*

"The legend" *by John Haines, 38*

Theater: "Stonewall Jackson's House" *by Mark Steyn, 41*; **Art:** "The Glory of Byzantium" at the Met *by Karen Wilkin, 46*; & Hannah Höch at MOMA *by Mario Naves, 51*; **Dance:** White Oak Dance Project *by Laura Jacobs, 55*; **The media:** Religion or the merely kooky? *by James Bowman, 59*; **Nonfiction chronicle:** "The Kiss" & other memoirs *by Brooke Allen, 64*

Books: Norman Davies *Europe: a history reviewed by Anne Applebaum, 70*; Philip Roth *American pastoral reviewed by James W. Tuttleton, 74*; Joseph Blotner *Robert Penn Warren: a biography reviewed by Richard Tillinghast, 78*; Christopher Ricks *Essays in appreciation reviewed by Paul Dean, 81*; **Letters, 85**

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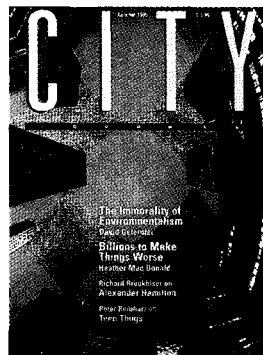
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— George F. Will

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Notes & Comments:

May 1997

A baneful influence

In general, we applaud the sentiment behind the old admonition *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*: “concerning the dead, say nothing except good things.” But the outpouring of mendacious piety let loose by the death of the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg last month leads us to endorse a competing principle: namely, that some basic attention ought to be paid to the truth.

It has been a long time since the truth was told about Allen Ginsberg. Catapulted to celebrity in 1956 when his poem “Howl” became the object of an obscenity suit, Ginsberg proved himself a master of calculated outrage for the next forty years. Long before his death at the age of seventy, he had managed to con a gullible cultural establishment into celebrating him as a major poetic talent and icon of sexual and political liberation. When his *Selected Poems 1947–1995* was published, the well-known critic Helen Vendler produced a long appreciation for *The New Yorker*, praising Ginsberg’s “remarkable poetic powers” and “dark sense of social evil.” In the early 1990s, Stanford University paid a million dollars to acquire Ginsberg’s papers. When he died, *The New York Times* published a front-page obituary describing him as “the poet laureate of the Beat Generation” whose work “provided a

bridge between the Underground and the Transcendental.” A letter from the poet Edward Field that appeared in the *Times* shortly after Ginsberg died summed up the received view of Ginsberg’s legacy:

The achievement of such a protean figure as Allen Ginsberg . . . could not be adequately covered even in your April 6 front-page obituary.

The United States has a special debt of gratitude to him for his role in the country’s release from the cultural and intellectual repression of the McCarthy era in the 50’s. After the barbarity of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the psychologist William Reich’s imprisonment and an age of other injustices, the appearance of Mr. Ginsberg’s “Howl!” signaled the beginning of a renewal of American values.

“Renewal”? Destruction is more like it. The truth is that Allen Ginsberg was an apostle of drug abuse, promiscuous homosexuality, and shameless exhibitionism. He specialized in blending mindless anti-Americanism with spurious forms of oriental “spirituality.” Like so many renegades from the counterculture, Ginsberg attacked bourgeois culture for its shallowness, hypocrisy, and materialism even as he capitalized on that culture. His status as a guru of the drug-sodden, blissed-out Left made him a powerful and baneful influence on an entire

generation of adolescents. It is impossible to calculate how many lives Ginsberg's smiling hedonism blighted with its bogus promises of instant ecstasy.

And what of his vaunted poetic achievement? Contributing to a garland of elegies for Ginsberg in *The Village Voice*, Robert Pinsky, the new poet laureate of the United States, called him "a great innovative poet" whose work would "remain part of American culture." Ginsberg's works are routinely taught in colleges and universities across the country. His *Collected Poems 1947-1980* runs to over eight hundred pages and is published by the venerable house of Harper-Collins. In fact, though, Ginsberg is the perfect literary equivalent of the emperor's new clothes. From beginning to end, his "poetry" is nothing but flatulent adolescent posturing, without art, verbal delicacy, or poetic subtlety. Ginsberg's themes are drugs, casual sex, the evils of America, and what amounts to mystical fatuousness. His method is a combination of bloated Whitmanesque rant and free association. Although he posed as a rebel, Ginsberg's deepest appeal is that of the sentimentalist: predictable emotions purveyed in pretentious verbiage. He is the Rod McKuen, the Kahlil Gibran of the counterculture, dispensing clichéd sentiments wrapped in clichéd verbal formulae.

Much of Ginsberg's "poetry" is little more than a species of self-absorbed pornography; it thrills him to use dirty words and to communicate the details of his many sexual encounters. In the 1950s, this was considered shocking; now it seems preposterous or merely banal. Banality, indeed, is one of Ginsberg's chief commodities: sexual banality, religious banality, political banality. Opening his *Collected Poems* at random, we find "Pentagon Exorcism," which begins:

Who represents my body in Pentagon?
Who spends

my spirit's billions of war manufacture? Who
levies the majority to exult unwilling in
Bomb
Roar? "*Brainwash!*" Mind-fear! Governor's
language!

No, it's not "Lycidas"; poetically, it's about on the level of a Hallmark greeting card, though of course the sentiments are not nearly so original.

During the course of his long career, Ginsberg wrote thousands of "poems." But his most famous effort by far remained "Howl," the aptly named verbal cacophony that begins "I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." The botched lives Ginsberg reported on were not the "best minds" of his generation, not by a long shot. But his example did indeed help to destroy many more minds and bodies. This is something that the numerous encomia to Ginsberg glossed over entirely. Having absorbed so much of the toxic narcissism of the counterculture, the liberal media and the academy embraced Allen Ginsberg as a visionary hero. In fact, he was a charlatan and a buffoon whose public antics would have been merely pathetic had they not contributed so mightily to the moral degradation of our times.

PEN's iron curtain

CARL ROLLYSON WRITES: I am working on a biography of Susan Sontag for W. W. Norton. Last October, I called PEN American Center to request board minutes for 1987-1989 when she was president. I was told they would get back to me. I called a week later and was informed that PEN's attorneys had advised that my request be denied because, while I am now a PEN member, I had not been during Sontag's

presidency. I replied that such reasoning seems disingenuous for an organization created to promote openness, freedom of expression, and understanding among writers.

In early November, I wrote to Karen Kennerly, PEN's executive director, and got no answer until January 3, when she wrote (replying to my second letter of December 16) that I would have my answer when the new board met later in January. Hearing nothing, I wrote again on February 24, pointing out that it had been easier for me to obtain Lillian Hellman's FBI file (for my 1988 biography of Hellman) than to get an answer out of PEN.

The recent controversy involving Lucy Komisar, editor of the PEN newsletter, is only the latest evidence that PEN is neither democratic nor open when it comes to examining its own practices. As one writer quipped, PEN "would be the first to defend Lucy Komisar if she were in Bosnia or Tiananmen Square." Behind the scenes, I'm told that no one wants to offend Sontag (still a board member), and that things are said at board meetings about other PEN chapters that would prove embarrassing if seen in the light of day. When I recently wrote to Komisar at PEN, her letter was opened before it was forwarded to her home address. What a pathetic, conspiratorial way to behave. It reminds me of teaching in Communist Poland, where—by

the way—my wife and co-author, Lisa Paddock, and I met Sontag in 1980. It is now six months since I requested PEN's board minutes. The iron curtain remains intact.

POSTSCRIPT, APRIL 21: On April 16, near the end of a long PEN meeting about openness and democratization in PEN, I spoke briefly about the organization's stonewalling of my request for board minutes. Clearly angry that I had raised the issue at a public meeting, PEN's new president, Michael Scammell, asked me if I had Susan Sontag's permission to write her biography. I replied that I had every right to write her biography, just as she had every right to oppose it. His remark suggested that he felt he needed Sontag's permission to release the board minutes—a curious position for the biographer of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to adopt. After the meeting, I asked him: "What if I were writing a history of PEN? Would you still refuse me the minutes?" Changing the subject, he replied that he did not appreciate my hijacking the meeting to vent my personal grievances. Then a former PEN board member told me that in 1986 the board had gone on record stating that minutes would be available to any member who requested them. Finally, a member of PEN's Freedom-to-Write Committee, told me that he was aghast that I had not received the minutes: "Our committee was all for you. Only PEN staff members were against approving your request."

The postmodern assault

by *Hilton Kramer*

*But the new barbarian is no uncouth
Desert-dweller; he does not emerge
From fir forests; factories bred him;
Corporate companies, college towns
Mothered his mind, and many journals
Backed his beliefs. He was born here.*

—W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

*It is still deemed civilized to believe in European
civilization.*

—Matthew Craske, *Art in Europe 1700–1830*

In the issue of the *London Times Literary Supplement* for March 6, 1996, readers of that venerable journal were given a remarkable account of the kind of intellectual license which is now commonplace for scholars in high places to impose upon objects of art-historical study. For those who had not yet fully awakened to the implications of the postmodern assault on the history and criticism of the fine arts, it must have come as a rude shock to discover just how far this bizarre mode of discourse had advanced in its task of deconstructing the great artistic achievements of the European past. For anyone who was already alert to the depredations of the postmodernist juggernaut, this review in the *TLS* was yet another melancholy reminder of how much ground has been lost to its malign imperatives.

The occasion was the publication by the Yale University Press of a book called *The Making of Rubens*. The author of this work

—Svetlana Alpers—is a professor of the history of art at the University of California, Berkeley, and an influential eminence in her scholarly discipline. Among her earlier publications are books on Rembrandt and seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting that were widely noticed and highly praised in both scholarly journals and the mainstream press. The reviewer for the *TLS* was Christopher Brown, curator of European painting at the National Gallery of Art in London and himself a distinguished scholar and connoisseur of the art that is the focus of Professor Alpers's study.

So troubled was Mr. Brown by the thesis propounded in *The Making of Rubens*, the title of which encompasses the kind of obscene pun that has become a hallmark of postmodernist criticism, that he felt obliged to apprise readers of the *TLS* of some background information on the scholarly debate that had preceded the publication of the book. It is thus necessary to quote at length from Mr. Brown's review not only for the exact character of Professor Alpers's project in *The Making of Rubens* to be clearly understood but for its significance as an example of the larger phenomenon it represents to be accurately assessed:

At a plenary session of the conference of Historians of Netherlandish Art held in Boston in 1993, Svetlana Alpers discussed Rubens's treatment of the subject of Silenus, the corpulent, drunken follower of Bacchus, Falstaff

to Bacchus's Prince Hal. It was interesting, she told us, that Rubens had painted and drawn this subject so often, and even more interesting that he had represented this depraved figure in a relatively positive light. So far, so good. She then drew our attention to the fact that close behind Silenus, in Rubens's painting of the subject in Munich, was a smiling black man who pinches a fold of the flesh of Silenus's left leg. The purpose of this hand-hold, she continued, was to enable him to penetrate Silenus. While the audience was trying to come to terms with this metaphor, Alpers made it clear by forceful repetition that it was not a metaphor and that she was telling us that Rubens was here representing an act of homosexual anal sex. She then went on to describe Silenus as a self-portrait of Rubens, although his features bear not the remotest resemblance to those of the artist, well known from more conventional self-portraits. It is a self-portrait in the same sense, we are told, that Degas's "Woman Looking through Opera-Glasses" is a self-portrait.

In the silence that followed the lecture, the other plenary speaker, Elizabeth McGrath, with ironical understatement, voiced the doubt that "anything untoward" was going on in the picture. During the subsequent discussion, there was amazement that anyone who knew about the historical personality of Rubens and about ideas of decorum in seventeenth-century painting could seriously propose such an interpretation. Alpers's "buggery of Silenus" lecture has now been published with two others in a short, well-illustrated book with the deliberately ambiguous title *The Making of Rubens*. It is not, I think, unfair to characterize the lecture in this way because, although there is much else in it, Alpers is aware of the sensational nature of her interpretation. She has toned it down a little for publication. When we first encounter this idea, the black man "follows so close as to appear to be penetrating the huge body from behind." Later, any doubts that this is what is happening are abandoned.

One of the ideas at issue in this bizarre reading of Rubens's *Drunken Silenus* is, of

course, the postmodern notion of "intentionality," which now beckons scholars in many humanistic disciplines to substitute for the verifiable data of historical research politically determined scenarios of their own invention—in other words, historical fictions. In this endeavor, which is designed to deconstruct the historical past for the purpose of bringing it into ideological alignment with the imperatives of postmodern discourse, a concentrated interest in perverse sexuality is a common priority. It derives its intellectual sanction from the new pseudo-disciplines of gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and the even more comprehensive field of cultural studies, all of which have had the effect of transforming history into a mythology that at times bears a remarkable resemblance to Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

About the use which Professor Alpers makes of this slippery notion of "intentionality" in *The Making of Rubens*, Mr. Brown had this to say:

She writes of the "intentionality of the painting," suggesting that this is in some way different from the intentionality of the artist. It raises the key point which applies to many of the ideas put forward in this book. What, precisely, is their status? In the case of Silenus, is Alpers telling us that Rubens deliberately threw aside all rules of seventeenth-century decorum? (In a long footnote, she admits to being unable to find any comparable scene in seventeenth-century art.) Does she believe that Rubens subconsciously painted this shocking subject within contemporary conventions and so revealed the feminine aspect of his art for which she argues? Or does she mean this to be a subjective twentieth-century interpretation? At no point is this issue clarified.

It can't be clarified, alas, because it is not in the nature of postmodern discourse to acknowledge the validity of the kind of distinctions—between, say, a subjective twentieth-century interpretation and an objective seventeenth-century cultural reality—that

Mr. Brown was concerned to make in this passage. The only “intentionality” that counts in *The Making of Rubens* is that which Professor Alpers brings to her critical project.

Postmodern criticism is thus condemned to live, for the most part, off the inherited aesthetic and historical judgments of the very past it seeks to unmask and subvert. By the nature of its essentially political project, it is itself incapable of contributing any new aesthetic intelligence to our understanding of the art of the past.

What may be known or reasonably inferred about Rubens’s intentions in the matter are rendered irrelevant to the inquiry.

Mr. Brown nonetheless persevered in offering the readers of the *TLS* a more conventional reading of Rubens—based, as he wrote, on “the context of [the artist’s] profound understanding of the Antique and his recreation of numerous classical scenes”:

A more plausible explanation for what the black man is actually doing is that he is pinching Silenus’s flesh to show to the amusement of his companions that Silenus is so drunk that he no longer has any feeling in his leg.

For an art historian of Professor Alper’s persuasion, however, such an unproblematic depiction of a satyr incapacitated by drunkenness would hardly qualify as a subject worthy of serious attention. What would there be to deconstruct if the subject of the *Drunken Silenus* really was taken to be a drunken Silenus? In the lexicon of postmodernist causes, alcohol abuse—unlike buggery, for example—has never enjoyed much of a priority. It just isn’t sufficiently sexy in itself, and lavishing scrutiny on ex-

cessive insobriety would in any case risk being seen to support conventional bourgeois morality, which it is also the purpose of postmodernism to deconstruct. So the subject of the *Drunken Silenus* had to be reinvented to qualify as a suitably sexy object of postmodernist hermeneutics.

It had to be reinvented, moreover, for a mode of critical discourse that is devoid of aesthetic analysis. For what also needs to be taken into account in this postmodernist assault on the history and criticism of the fine arts is the absence of any newly formulated aesthetic judgments in determining the objects of critical scrutiny. The rejection of aesthetics—and of the connoisseurship that derives from the comparative aesthetic analysis of works of art—is indeed fundamental to the postmodern discourse about art.

Postmodern criticism is thus condemned to live, for the most part, off the inherited aesthetic and historical judgments of the very past it seeks to unmask and subvert. By the nature of its essentially political project, it is itself incapable of contributing any new aesthetic intelligence to our understanding of the art of the past. It cannot tell us why Rubens’s painting *as a painting* is still worth our attention more than three centuries after its creation. It takes Rubens’s importance for granted—granted, that is, by critical precedent—as it exploits his traditional position in the history of art in order to offer us instruction in subjects more congenial to the postmodern agenda. In the case of *The Making of Rubens*, the real subject turns out to be—what else?—“male femininity,” which Rubens’s depiction of Silenus is alleged to represent. What for 157 pages has been masquerading as art history is actually a postmodern homily on the variety of human sexuality. Professor Alpers gives the whole game away in the closing paragraph of her book:

When there is a rush, as there is today, to recognize and name the subversive, transgressive and the marginal, it is useful to be reminded that complex notions of identity and of identification are not new. It might be that

what is now being construed as exceptional is instead fundamental to human nature and to the ways in which it is understood. Rubens's Silenus gives evidence of this as he confronts the condition of human generation and creativity. But, I must admit, Silenus was a marginal figure.

Unfortunately for anyone concerned about the future of the European past as far as the writing of art history is concerned, Professor Alpers's intellectual enterprise in *The Making of Rubens* is anything but marginal. It is, on the contrary, entirely representative of the intellectual catastrophe that has overtaken the writing of art history and art criticism in this last decade of the twentieth century, not only at the higher altitudes of academic specialization and prestige but in the popularization of postmodern discourse that has now insinuated itself into the college classroom, the art museums, and the mainstream critical press.

What a radical coterie of elite academics has been cooking up in learned journals and professional conferences for more than a generation is now being served, cafeteria-style, to masses of unwary students and museumgoers as reliable guides to the experience of art. Out of the postmodern seminars in the universities have come the new cadres of museum curators, who now embark upon their professional duties without the slightest knowledge of the kind of connoisseurship that was formerly the hallmark of their vocation, and they in turn further propagate the postmodern gospel—which is often the only thing they know about art—in the exhibition catalogues and wall texts that now compete for the public's attention with the art objects on display. For the postmodern assault is nothing if not fiercely didactic in its ideological mission—didactic, that is, about everything but the aesthetic distinctions that separate a work of fine art from the other objects of material culture that our civilization has produced in such profusion.

What this is likely to mean for the future of our understanding of Europe's artistic

past can be gleaned in this recent announcement from the Oxford University Press:

Although art scholarship has undergone a radical change in recent years, this new thinking cannot be found in art book series now on the market. Moving away from the elitist, connoisseurial approach of the past, the *Oxford History of Art* seeks to clarify and illuminate its subjects by considering art (as well as architecture, photography, and design) in its social and cultural context. Series authors explore the aesthetic merits of a work and seek to answer such questions as: Why was the work created? What was it used for? What did contemporary critics and ordinary people think of it? And while the authors cover all the major artists and iconic masterpieces of art history, they also broaden the scope of their inquiries to include discussions of unfamiliar works often dismissed by traditional surveys and texts. Volumes on neglected subject areas such as Art and Sexuality, Art and Film, Women in Art, Native North American Art, and Menaleian Art will also be included in the series.

The first five volumes on this new *Oxford History of Art* have now been published, and by the year 2001 a total of some sixty titles is expected to complete the project. The result aspires to provide us with "a comprehensive, accessible library covering all aspects of art and architecture, East and West, from ancient civilizations to Cindy Sherman."

If the art of Europe continues, perforce, to loom very large in Oxford's new postmodern multiculturalist *History of Art*, that carefully chosen reference to the art of the American feminist photographer Cindy Sherman as the terminal achievement to be considered in this comprehensive chronicle of the world's art puts us on notice that the European past will not otherwise be "privileged," as they say, in this series. Indeed, to judge by the first two volumes to be devoted to European art in the new *Oxford History—Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500* by Evelyn Welch and *Art in Europe 1700–1830* by Matthew Craske—the specifically *artistic*

achievements of the European past can scarcely be said to come up for consideration. The real focus of inquiry in these histories is on social, sexual, economic, and political developments, which works of art are merely cited as illustrating but are not discussed within the disciplines of their own creation.

Thus, despite the promise that “the aesthetic merits of a work” would be explored in the series, the new Oxford *History* is art history purged of all aesthetic analysis. It is art history as the socio-political history of material culture—art history, that is to say, as fodder for postmodernist deconstruction on a vast scale. It is art history with the mind of the artist left out.

Nor do the first two volumes on European art even pretend to explain to newcomers to their subjects—the readers primarily targeted by the series—why some artists have come to be considered “major” and certain works of art have over time acquired the status of “iconic masterpieces of

Out of the postmodern seminars in the universities have come the new cadres of museum curators, who now embark upon their professional duties without the slightest knowledge of the kind of connoisseurship that was formerly the hallmark of their vocation.

art history.” There are illustrations of certain works by Fra Angelico reproduced in *Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500*, for example, and some illustrations of Chardin reproduced in *Art in Europe 1700–1830*, but no discussion of the art of painting in either case.

As for what is discussed in these volumes that are being sold to us as art history, here is a representative excerpt from the section on “Art and the Household” in Evelyn Welch’s *Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500*:

The phrase used by the Florentine officials, that women were like “little sacks,” was based on their understanding of human biology, one which was quite confused in this period. There were a number of competing theories of human conception and female anatomy on offer in the fifteenth century. The most widely accepted version was based on Aristotle’s writings. According to this philosophical system all living creatures were composed of two basic binary opposites: they were either hot or cold, or wet or dry. Men were generally hot and dry; women were normally cold and wet. A human being was created by mixing the hot, active male seed with the cold, passive female menstrual fluid. This contact acted like rennet on milk, coagulating the fluid and initiating the development of a cheese-like foetus which gradually solidified. If there was enough heat available, the more perfect form, a male child would result; too much cold and damp resulted in a less perfect form, the female or “incomplete male.”

This may not be as inventive as Professor Alpers’s scenario for *Drunken Silenus*, but it is equally useless as a means of comprehending some of the greatest achievements of European art.

But then, from a postmodern perspective, it may no longer be possible to speak of “European art,” or even of “Europe.” Or so, anyway, Matthew Craske hastens to warn us in the opening pages of *Art in Europe 1700–1830*. “If to ascribe to and perpetuate the model of ‘European art’ developing through grand and cogent phases can be held to be a matter of belief,” he writes in the Introduction, “this book is declaredly the work of an infidel.” The problem, as Mr. Craske understands it, is what he calls “a cosmopolitan vision of Europe,” which is now said to be outdated. “Europe is assumed to be a distinct civilization which developed in cogent phases. This tendency reflects a tradition of cosmopolitan thought which . . . stretches back into the eighteenth century; a tradition of associating cultivation of mind, both in scholastic and connoisseurial fields, with the assumption of a

cosmopolitan vision of European culture.” Even worse, in his view, is that “it is still deemed civilized to believe in European civilization.” Thus, while professing—or condescending—to write “in a spirit of respect for the faithful,” Mr. Craske nonetheless acknowledges that in *Art in Europe 1700–1830* his “text gives priority to the discussion of the social and economic causes of art-historical change.” The result is indeed art history with the mind—and the talent—of the artists left out.

In this wholesale critical deconstruction of the great artistic achievements of the European past the nihilist imperatives of contemporary art in the last two decades of the twentieth century are also, of course, directly implicated. It is from the perversities of postmodernist art, after all, that the revisionist historians have often taken their cues and sanctions—not always openly acknowledged, to be sure—in deconstructing the art of the past. This is especially true in those cases where what Susan Sontag once called an “erotics of art” is given—as it customarily is in postmodern criticism—priority over standards of aesthetic judgment.

Without the radical revision of taste presupposed by the acclaim lavished on the sexually bizarre photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe by the contemporary art establishment, for example, it is unlikely that we should ever have been treated to a spectacle like that of Professor Alpers’s “buggery of Silenus” lecture. In what Professor Alpers called the “rush . . . to recognize and name the subversive, transgressive and the marginal” in human sexuality, so as to be duly understood and approved as “fundamental to human nature,” the art world’s aggrandizement of the photographs Mapplethorpe devoted to “transgressive” sexuality certainly played a considerable role. Mapplethorpe’s achievement of eminence on the contemporary art scene had a lot less to do with the aesthetic quality of his photography than with its wayward sexual subjects, and the same is true, of course, for the “buggery of Silenus” lecture.

For revisionist art historians determined to bring the past into alignment with a postmodern agenda, Mapplethorpe has indeed become something of a touchstone.

For revisionist art historians determined to bring the past into alignment with a post-modern agenda, Mapplethorpe has become something of a touchstone. The work is just arty enough to pass for having some sort of claim on aesthetic distinction, or “style,” and the subject matter serves as a guarantee of its required “transgressive” character.

The work is just arty enough to pass for having some sort of claim on aesthetic distinction, or “style,” and the subject matter serves as a guarantee of its required “transgressive” character. It is no doubt for reasons of this sort that a Mapplethorpe photograph was chosen to adorn the cover of Graham Clarke’s *The Photograph*, another of the initial titles in the *Oxford History of Art* series, placing it firmly within the framework of the postmodern scenario. In the book itself, Mapplethorpe’s work is given closer attention than that of significantly greater photographers—Eugène Atget, for instance, and Walker Evans—for what one can only assume are the same reasons. It is certainly true that neither Atget’s *oeuvre* nor Evans’s would quite lend itself to the kind of analysis that Mr. Clarke is eager to devote to Mapplethorpe:

Often Mapplethorpe . . . *dresses* for the camera—in a tuxedo, in leather, in make-up. Most contentiously, in a 1978 self-portrait he has inserted a bull-whip into his anus as he looks at the camera: an obviously radical and

extrovert *reversal* of virtually all the conventions of the portrait photograph. These photographic portraits place themselves within a larger context of gender and identity, but *as* photographs they insist upon themselves as part of a continuing metamorphosis in which a single personality does not so much change as reject the codes through which identity, private as much as public, is assumed, determined, and declared.

We are thus dispatched once again to the gender studies seminar, where the mind of the postmodernist is securely anchored to sexual politics and the artistic issues in photography need not be pondered. Not surprisingly, in the chapter which Mr. Clarke devotes to “The Portrait in Photography,” the subject he turns to immediately after Mapplethorpe is Cindy Sherman, of whose pictures he writes: “And just as Mapplethorpe explicitly questions heterosexual codes of being, so too does Sherman question the terms by which woman is to be known and viewed. . . . In the end there *is* no literal reality. All is construction and myth and, ultimately, self-enclosed fantasy.” Which, come to think of it, is not an inaccurate way to sum up the quality of the whole postmodern agenda.

One of the questions that must inevitably be addressed about that agenda is whether in the end it really differs all that much from the modernism that preceded its current assault. Wasn’t there, after all, a nihilist strain in modernism as well—and if so, in what ways may the postmodernist assault be distinguished from it?

Now it certainly has to be acknowledged that the nihilist imperative has been a discernible component—and often a deadly coefficient—of the modern movement for at least a hundred years; since, that is to say, the cry of “*Merde! Merde!*” was first heard in public in the debut performance of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre in Paris in 1896. That was the performance that prompted William Butler Yeats, who was in the audience, to make his famous prediction: “After us, the savage god.” It was

beyond even Yeats’s clairvoyant powers, however, to imagine just how savage and perverse the gods of art would become a hundred years later, especially since Yeats’s own art was always—whatever its other peculiarities—to stand at a great distance from “the savage god” he had glimpsed that fateful evening in Paris.

Between the cry of “*Merde! Merde!*” in *Ubu Roi* in 1896 and, say, “The Naked Shit Pictures,” which the celebrated postmodernists Gilbert & George exhibited in London to enormous public acclaim in the 1990s, there is an obvious connection, to be sure, but some crucial differences as well, especially in the response accorded to these respective artistic endeavors by respectable

The postmodernist assault on tradition—moral tradition as well as the traditions of Western art and thought—is inevitably an assault on the European past, and with each passing year our cultural isolation from that past as anything more than a tourist attraction looks more and more irreversible.

opinion. Gilbert & George come to us in a line of descent that can be traced back to the Dadaist mystifications of Marcel Duchamp, who would not himself emerge as an artist-hero beloved by the academy and the art establishment until the early 1960s—until, that is, the advent of Pop Art and its most celebrated mascot, Andy Warhol. Prior to the 1960s, Duchamp was generally regarded as a minor figure in the modern movement—important for his role in the New York branch of Dada, to be sure, and a sideline player in the Surrealist movement later on, but a minor figure all the same. It was only in the 1960s, when Pop Art, Warholism, and the politics of the counterculture combined

to give us our first glimpse of what would soon thereafter become the postmodern assault, that Duchamp was elevated to artistic sainthood—the subject of glossy-magazine profiles, museum retrospectives, academic studies, and intellectual hero worship—and the way was prepared for a takeover by his numerous progeny.

Some years ago, in an essay on “The Age of the Avant-Garde,” I had occasion to suggest that the modern movement in the arts—which was what was meant by the avant-garde—was a far more complex cultural phenomenon than was commonly appreciated, that it harbored in fact an “agenda of internal conflict and debate, not only about aesthetic matters but about the social values that govern them”:

If the bourgeois ethos may be said to have both a “progressive” and a “reactionary” side, the avant-garde is similarly divided. At one extreme, there is indeed an intransigent radicalism that categorically refuses to acknowledge the contingent and rather fragile character of the cultural enterprise, a radicalism that cancels all debts to the past in the pursuit of a new vision, however limited and fragmentary and circumscribed, and thus feels at liberty—in fact, compelled—to sweep anything and everything in the path of its own immediate goals, whatever the consequences. It is from this radical extreme, of which Dada, I suppose, is the quintessential expression, that our romance of the avant-garde is largely derived. But the history of the avant-garde is by no means confined to these partisans of wholesale revolt. It also boasts its champions of harmony and tradition. It is actually among the latter that we are likely to find the most solid and enduring achievements of the modern era. . . .

I further characterized the fundamental division of the modern movement as that “between art conceived as a form of guerrilla warfare and art conceived as a vital tradition.”¹ A quarter of a century later, that “guerrilla” movement, having completed its long march through the institutions of cul-

tural life, is what we now mean by the postmodern assault, and the modernism that attached itself with so much conviction and intelligence—and genius!—to the vital traditions of European art and thought has proved to be one of its principal targets.

It was also observed in “The Age of the Avant-Garde” that the dissensions generated by this division “tended to increase, both in ferocity and effect, more or less in direct ratio to the turbulence of the political scene.” I was writing in the direct aftermath of the counterculture of the 1960s, and what has happened in the long interim, of course, is that the ideology of that counterculture is now fully established as the governing spirit of mainstream cultural life. The guerrillas of the 1960s have become the cultural commissars of the 1990s. Whatever they have lost in the realm of electoral politics—and the effect of their cultural conquests does seem to have been a vast increase in the number of political conservatives who achieve election to public office—they have more than made up for in the “culture wars” that are now their principal arena of political action.

The postmodernist assault on tradition—moral tradition as well as the traditions of Western art and thought—is inevitably an assault on the European past, and with each passing year our cultural isolation from that past as anything more than a tourist attraction looks more and more irreversible. It isn’t only in postmodern art histories like Matthew Craske’s *Art in Europe 1700–1830* that a belief in “European civilization” is now under attack. Belligerent denunciations of “Eurocentric” educational programs in the service of a politically determined multiculturalist pedagogy are now commonplace and enjoy the sanction of governmental bodies and the even more influential taste-making powers of popular culture. In the realm of art history and the criticism of art, anyway, the ground to be retrieved is already immense.

¹ See the introductory essay in *The Age of the Avant-Garde* (1973).

C. J. Herington: an homage

by Roger Kimball

Anyone who sets out to predict any aspect of future society must begin by acknowledging that we are now in the midst of a cultural transition compared to which the transitions from oral to written literature, and from manuscript to print, may prove to have been quite minor affairs.

—C. J. Herington

When the British-born classicist John Herington died suddenly in April at the age of 72, another irreplaceable light went out in the academic firmament. It was not, I hasten to add, a light that the public, even the academic public, knew much about. For although John had long ago earned the respect and admiration of his peers, the affection and gratitude of his students, he never achieved anything like the celebrity that has been lavished upon such academic mountebanks as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Indeed, although he may fairly be said to have enjoyed a distinguished career—replete with honors, encomia, and plum professorships—he neither aspired to nor achieved even the more transient notoriety that waits upon the self-aggrandizing intellectual antics of such academic tricksters as Harold Bloom or Stanley Fish, to say nothing of their many epigoni.

John's distinction was something altogether quieter, more solid, less common. In brief, John Herington was a dedicated scholar whose commanding knowledge of Latin and Greek (along with French, Ger-

man, and Italian) was everywhere animated by a frank and thoroughly unpretentious passion for literature. If this seems like small beer, pause to consider how rare the union of deep scholarly accomplishment, infectious enthusiasm for the riches of literature, and unfeigned personal modesty is in the academic world today. Can any of us go far beyond the fingers of one hand enumerating living examples of men and women who embody such qualities? John Herington was not a star by the tawdry standards of contemporary academia. But in his career as a scholar and teacher he represented the accumulated achievements of Western civilization. He was a man through whom European culture from the Greeks down to our own time resonated in the patient syllables of earnest humanistic inquiry. The sadness of John's death is compounded by the knowledge that, rare though teachers and scholars of his caliber have been in the past, they are many times rarer today, when so much of academia—like so much of our culture generally—is devoted not to the preservation but to the debasement and destruction of that legacy.

Cecil John Herington was born in November 1924 in Isleworth, England, and educated at Oxford. He taught at Manchester University and Exeter University in the late 1940s and 1950s before coming to the United States in 1960 to teach at Smith College. In subsequent years, he taught at the University of Toronto, the University of

Texas at Austin, Stanford, and Yale, where he was Talcott Professor of Greek and, for several years, chairman of the classics department. Along the way, he became a U.S. citizen. After his retirement in the 1980s, he taught briefly at Duke and then at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

John's early work, published under the name C. J. Herington, included books on Greek religion and—a lifelong passion—Aeschylus. (He later collaborated with the poet James Scully on a translation of *Prometheus Bound* and with the poet Janet Lembke on a translation of *The Persians*.) He was fortunate to arrive at the University of Texas at a moment when it was flush with oil money and the galvanizing efforts of a triumvirate of ambitious young scholars: John Silber, chairman of the philosophy department and later president of Boston University, the classicist William Arrowsmith, and the critic and poet Roger Shattuck. These men were given direct access to the chancellor and were thus able to transform the humanities at Austin by attracting important literary and philosophical talent.

In 1962, three years before John Herington joined them at Austin, Arrowsmith and D. S. Carne-Ross helped to start *Arion*, a quarterly journal of the classics and humanities. Designed to appeal more to the literate Common Reader than the academic specialist, *Arion* was a breath of fresh air in the musty, philological corridors of professorial classics. In those years, *Arion* was bold, passionate, and not infrequently idiosyncratic; more than anything, it pulsed with life. (*Arion* has had a complicated publishing history; the current run of the magazine, which was reborn with a new editor in 1990 after a fifteen-year hiatus, has in general been a disappointment.) A prime tenet of the original *Arion* was that the classics belonged not just to classicists but to anyone interested in the art and the human wisdom they contained. In other words, it was custom-made for a scholar like John Herington, who went on to write some of his best essays for the magazine, including a long and dazzling essay on Seneca.

John's career blossomed. He went to Yale in 1972. There were grants and prizes and scholarly recognitions. In 1978, he was invited to give the prestigious Sather Classical Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley. These were published, in expanded form, as *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition*, in 1985. Also in the mid-1980s, John inaugurated Hermes Books, a series of short, non-specialist books on classical authors, for the Yale University Press. His own contribution to the series, on Aeschylus, manages the difficult feat of bringing to life for the Greekless reader this great but remote giant of Western culture. As general editor of the series, he matched writers and subjects, overseeing books on (at last count) Homer, Pindar, Catullus, Hesiod, Ovid, and Virgil.

As with any such series, Hermes Books contains a dud or two. But it is surprising how frequently John succeeded in finding writers who fulfilled the stringent requirements he outlined in the note that prefaces each volume. What he sought were men and women who were possessed of "a love for literature in other languages, extending into modern times; a vision that extends beyond academe to contemporary life itself; and above all an ability to express themselves in clear, lively, and graceful English, without polysyllabic language or parochial jargon." Again, this may seem like a perfectly ordinary set of desiderata: but it takes only a quick look at what the academic presses are turning out these days to remind one how seldom such requirements are met.

John's ambition for Hermes Books followed naturally from his understanding of what had happened to classical studies in the modern university. "It is," he wrote, "a strange situation."

On the one side stand the classical masters of Greece and Rome, those models of concision, elegance, and understanding of the human condition, who composed least of all for narrow technologists, most of all for the Common Reader (and, indeed, the Common Hearer). On the other side stands a sort of in-

dustrial complex, processing those masters into an annually growing output of technical articles and monographs.

"Narrow" was one of John's severest terms of opprobrium, along, perhaps, with "technical" and "specialist." There was something a little odd about this because John was himself the most fastidious of scholars. One could almost see him wince at a false quantity or boorish translation. There is a story about his having once written, in Latin, to the Vatican Library about some project he was working on. When in due course he received a reply, he could not forbear to point out the writer's various solecisms: that such and such a word would never have been used before the fifth century, etc.

For all his learning, John was exceptionally unassuming. He was the least professorial of professors—not, as is the fashion these days, because he dressed and acted like the adolescents he taught, but because his concern with the art and insights of the classical masters left little room for displays of egotism. In this sense, anyway, John was a true Arnoldian. He believed, as Arnold put it in *Culture and Anarchy*, that culture ultimately aims "to do away with classes" and "make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere." He held himself to the most exacting standards. And yet his enthusiasm for the classics—and for literature generally—was such that he would ignore all manner of ineptness in others in order to bring them closer to the heart of literary experience.

I was myself one of the many beneficiaries of this largess. I met John when I was a graduate student at Yale. I had joined a small group of philosophy students who met weekly each semester with an unusually dedicated professor to read slowly through some philosophical text. These extra-curricular sessions were among the most intense and rewarding of my graduate career.

So it happened that I found myself working through *De li non aliud*, a short, difficult work by the Renaissance philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa. Although I

had had Latin in high school, topped off with a bit more in college, I quickly found that I was not up to the rigors of Cusa's Latin. (We were reading the work in English, but in order to understand what Cusa was saying it was often necessary to refer to the original.) I decided to try to brush up my Latin and asked around to see if anyone might be able to help. Someone suggested that I talk to John Herington, who was then chairman of the classics department. I am a little embarrassed to admit it, but I simply presented myself at his office one day and suggested that he tutor me, a student from another department whom he had never laid eyes on before, in medieval Latin. Youth is self-absorbed and insouciant, so I was not as surprised as I ought to have been when he agreed. Perhaps the fact that John had been laboring for some years on a medieval Latin workbook (which was never, I believe, published) tipped the scales in my favor. In any event, we met an hour or more most weeks for an entire semester, I stumbling over Cusa's grammar with (as I later discovered) one of the country's most eminent classicists.

That semester marked the beginning of our friendship. We were never intimate friends, but we kept in touch and saw each other occasionally through the years. And while John was only briefly and informally my teacher, I nevertheless learned a great deal from him—though not, alas, as much Latin as I should have. John's wide culture meant that sharing a meal or conversation with him always left one a little richer.

There is a deep sense in which John's love of literature was continuous with his appreciation of other products of human ingenuity. He was unusual among academics in being exceptionally handy. He was an accomplished sailor; and he once, I am told, constructed an elaborate model of a classical temple in his backyard, replete with a hand-chiseled inscription. His fascination with poems was in one sense part of his fascination with all intricately wrought products of

the human imagination. For him, they were spiritual markers, incarnate tokens of human yearning and habitation. So it was that John did not simply “profess” literature, he lived it. I do not mean that he looked to literature as a substitute for life. He was not an aesthete. On the contrary, he looked to literature as a means of illuminating life. It was pleasure and insight that he sought, not escape. He understood that literature in its highest sense was one of humanity’s primary antidotes to barbarism and spiritual narrowness. The facts of modern life dictate that most people who read literature at all will read a lot of it in school and college. But if it stops there, if what one reads does not become a part of the way one experiences the world—part of one’s moral makeup, the pulse against which life is tested—then (in T. S. Eliot’s phrase) one has had the experience but missed the meaning.

I fear that I may be making this sound more solemn than it was. A conversation with John might well revolve around the niceties of Greek stage design or the remarkable editions of Latin classics that were prepared for the Dauphin. But it might just as well revolve around other important matters—the works of P. G. Wodehouse, for example. I am especially grateful to John for having introduced me to Wodehouse’s reflections on Mr. Mulliner, in particular the story “Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court,” which contains that immortal paean to the joys of hunting, “Good Gnu.” (“When cares attack and life seems black,/ How sweet it is to pot a yak,” etc.)

John’s palpable enthusiasm undoubtedly aided his effectiveness as a teacher. I remember an occasion when my wife and I had dinner with him and another friend in New Haven. My wife happened to be reading Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurian*. Pater had based part of that book on letters by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius that had been accidentally discovered by one Cardinal Mai. Mai had been reading through some antique manuscript in the

Imperial Library in Milan in 1815 when he noticed a palimpsestual text embedded in the document. Further investigation showed that the text behind the text consisted of letters by Marcus to his tutor, Marcus Cornelius Fronto. At a stroke, these personal letters revealed a new, more intimate dimension of the great Stoic philosopher and statesman. It was the kind of discovery that any scholar would die for. John of course knew all about this famous story, but he positively vibrated with happiness as he filled us in on various details about the discovery and what it revealed about Roman life.

John published a half a dozen pieces in *The New Criterion* over the years, beginning in June 1990 with a translation of a chorus from the *Operette Morali* by the nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. He also contributed a handful of book reviews on classical subjects to the magazine, and, just this past February, an essay for our year-long series on “The Future of the European Past.” Entitled “Possessing the Golden Key,” this ambitious piece assesses the likely prospects for classical studies in this country. It is not a cheery piece—how could it be?—but as always John approached the subject with a combination of quiet wit, percipience, and judicious understatement. He begins by acknowledging the fact—as quoted in the epigraph above—that the so-called information revolution bequeaths not only classical studies but society as a whole both a tool and a temptation of momentous power.

Mankind has always sought ways to escape from the burden of self-knowledge. Drugs and alcohol are but crude expedients compared to infinite regress offered by computers and the Internet. Modern technology offers us a galaxy of information at the click of a mouse. How can one overstate the technical advantage this represents? It is nothing short of a marvel, putting at the fingertips of the most ignorant schoolboy in the remotest hamlet the accumulated research of a thousand libraries. But John’s point—a point that the extraordinary power

of modern communications seduces us into forgetting—is that this marvel can be a destructive simulacra of knowledge rather than the real thing.

If the humanities have anything to teach us, it is that information, whatever its uses, is not wisdom. At best it is an enabling complement to wisdom. In the end, the information revolution is a double-edge gift to the humanities. It makes more, much more, possible in the realm of culture; but ever less, it seems, is actually accomplished. Increased possibilities do not necessarily translate into increased accomplishments. What the humanities offer us cannot finally be speeded up or expedited. They depend crucially on first-hand experience. As John observed in “Possessing the Golden Key,” “the real, the lasting culture is that which one has to go out and get for oneself, perhaps through great labor; not that which has to be laid on, piped in from outside like the water through the giant aqueducts.” And again, “people who have once lost the habit of going out and reading for themselves will gradually lose the capacity to love what they read or even to understand it.”

John anticipated many of the points made in “Possessing the Golden Key” in “Litterae Inhumaniores,” an essay he first published in *Arion*. The humanities, he noted there, “were not in the business of solving problems. They were in the business of enlarging individuals.” To what extent is graduate education in the humanities—presumably the very apex of humanistic culture—fulfilling its task of enlarging individuals and encouraging them, as teachers, to enlarge others? Even to ask the question is to induce a shudder. The truth is that in this country higher education in the humanities, especially on the graduate level, has lost its way. Today, John observed, the humanities, “instead of enlarging the individual, . . . now seem to narrow and pervert.” The folly of so much that goes on under the name of “higher education” in this country is a powerful reminder that the humanities are in a state of crisis that re-

quires for its solution not more information but more wisdom.

John freely admitted that much of what he had to say about the humanities was a cliché. But he also noted that “it is in the nature of clichés to be both profoundly true and perpetually forgotten.” It is the task of the humanities to recall us to such truths. In this battle, a battle to preserve our interior life, literature is a potent weapon. It is an enemy of amnesia, a prop of emotional delicacy, a repository of insight about man’s struggle to understand himself. In this sense, great works of literature are both windows onto the world and mirrors that reflect the soul. I was reminded of this when re-reading John’s beautiful translation of Horace’s Ode I.11, the famous “carpe diem” ode. Often cited as a celebration of greedy hedonism, Horace’s poem is in fact a melancholy reflection of the action of *invidia aestas*, “envious time.” John deepens that reflection, linking time with its great companion and antagonist, love:

You must not ask the end (to know is
wickedness)
that God has set for you and me,
Lynne, my white heart: Leuconoe: you must
not

search in our horoscopes. Let’s take what
comes; maybe
this stormwind is the last that God
will let us feel, us together, this same wind

which even now is breaking the rampant
Tuscan seas
in foam against embattled rock.
Now have some sense, pour the wine! And
cut away

long ages of our hope in the brief slash of love.
While you and I are talking, were
talking, Time envies, envied, comes and
went; oh

pick today’s flower! As little as you can
trust in tomorrow, Leuconoe. White heart.
Lynne.

Revisionist lust: the Smithsonian today

by Heather Mac Donald

Recent visitors to the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum were greeted with some unpleasant news: the museum was contaminated. Not by asbestos or toxic chemicals, mind you, but by far more noxious substances: racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism. To protect the unwary, warning labels throughout the halls identified which of the museum's venerable dioramas were infected by which ideological error. "Female animals are being portrayed in ways that make them appear deviant or substandard to male animals," warned a label next to an exhibit of American har-tebeests. A beloved family of lions at a watering hole was also branded for sexism, because the standing male and reclining female suggested to the museum's gender police a pre-feminist division of labor. A leaping Bengalese tiger was dismissed as too predatory, a violation of the communitarian animal ethic.

The Natural History Museum is not the only Smithsonian institution to have rethought its mission in recent years. Next door at the National Museum of American History, visitors encounter an America characterized by rigid class barriers, ever-growing economic inequality, predatory capitalists, and oppressed minorities. Several blocks away, curators at the Smithsonian's American Art Museum are busy exposing art as just another "social text" masking illegitimate power relations. And across the Mall, Air and Space Museum

curators, still fuming over the cancellation of the shameful Enola Gay exhibit, whine like grounded teenagers about the old military fogies now directing the museum who are inhibiting the curators' revisionist lust.

Anyone who still doubts that the madness currently possessing American universities matters to society at large should take a stroll through today's Smithsonian. The Institution has been transformed by a wholesale embrace of the worst elements of America's academic culture. The staples of cutting-edge academic "research"—smirking irony, cultural relativism, celebration of putative victims, facile attacks on science—are all thriving in America's premier museum and research complex, its showcase to itself and to the world. The changes at the Smithsonian are not unique to that institution. Museums across the country have rushed headlong into what may be called the "new museology," based on a mindless parroting of academic fads. But the Smithsonian's embrace of postmodern theory and identity politics is of greatest import, because of the Institution's contribution to America's public identity.

For most of its history, the Smithsonian has been driven by the thirst for knowledge. In 1835, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in London received news of a most unusual bequest. James Smithson, a British aristocrat and amateur scientist, had left his estate of a hundred thousand pounds to the "United

States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." Smithsonian, a bastard of august lineage, had never been to America; his gift may have been revenge against his native society for snubbing him for his illegitimate birth, or it may have simply reflected his admiration for the democratic experiment under way across the Atlantic.

Smithson's bequest caused an enormous stir. After eight years of heated debate over its interpretation—suggestions included an agricultural college and an observatory—Congress finally defined the institution in 1846 as a national museum for government collections, a laboratory, an art gallery, and a library.

An explosion in scientific knowledge and America's passionate desire to discover what lay west drove the Smithsonian in the nineteenth century. Smithsonian naturalists accompanied westward expeditions, and returned to the Castle (the Smithsonian's first building) on the Mall with crates of mineral, animal, and vegetable specimens. Smithsonian geologists heroically mapped unknown territory, and Smithsonian ethnographers lovingly chronicled Indian cultures. For the next century and a half, this drive for knowledge would continue, until eventually, the Institution's collections would constitute a veritable library of the world.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, while the Smithsonian's scientific research continued apace, its historical and cultural identity subtly changed. As its current curators proudly describe it, the Institution became sensitive to the social and political currents swirling around it—ghetto riots, Vietnam War protests, and women's "liberation." Museums nationwide became terrified of the charge of "elitism," and adopted the media of popular culture to increase their "relevance."

The Smithsonian of the 1970s already looked to the academy for its inspiration,

particularly to the new fields of social and cultural history. A 1976 show on immigration at the Museum of History and Technology (since renamed the National Museum of American History) reflected this influence in its acute attention to race and class. Also academically inspired was the Institution's newfound zest for exhibiting the detritus of popular culture, most famously, its Archie Bunker Chair.

But nothing in the 1970s matched the changes ushered in by anthropologist Robert McCormick Adams, who assumed the Smithsonian secretaryship in 1984. Adams had been sold to Congress as someone who would increase the scholarly standards at the Institution, illustrating yet again the utter cluelessness of politicians and ordinary people regarding the academically enfranchised cultural Left. Described by *The Washington Post* as a "happily successful Establishment radical," Adams declared the purpose of museums to be "confrontation, experimentation, and debate"—a politically charged manifesto that pointedly ignored the Smithsonian's mandate to increase knowledge. Adams dictated an aggressive program to "diversify" the Institution, and set out to hire curators, mostly from the academy, that shared his commitment to "critical" scholarship.

The Adams regime (which ended in 1994) perfected the "new museology" at the Smithsonian. The most important principle of the new dogma is "honoring multiple ways of interpreting the world." Curatorial expertise and scientific knowledge are out; "multiple voices" and relativism in all its forms are in. (As we will see, however, only certain "voices" ever seem to get heard.) In furtherance of the "multiple interpretations" principle, the new museologist consults with "the community" in devising exhibits. Moreover, those exhibits must aim to enhance self-esteem: they are designed to increase the ethnic pride of minorities. Concomitant with this redressive principle, a new museological exhibit is grossly ahistorical: it exports contemporary standards of equity to the past in order to make its

case against oppression and victimhood seem stronger.

The final two principles of the new museology are contempt for the public, and infatuation with high-tech wizardry. With the exception of these last two tenets, the new museology is directly imported from the academy. The Smithsonian's recent public relations fiascoes all embodied one or more of its principles.

A prototypical new hire of the Adams regime—and classic “new museologist”—was Robert Sullivan, responsible for the warning labels on the Natural History Museum's dioramas. Sullivan was brought to the museum in 1990 as director of public programs, and his existence there is particularly unfortunate, for no museum better embodies the Smithsonian's glorious past. To Sullivan, however, that past is cause for shame and criticism. Sullivan is nothing if not steeped in theory, and he can reel off Foucauldian riffs with the best of them. Natural history museums embody the concept of “Safe Terror,” he explains; they were part of the “Victorian campaign of containing wildness.” “While the etiquette books were talking of how to conceal, repress, and deny bodily functions of any sort,” he says, “natural history museums were created as a place to exhibit such wildness from a safe distance.” Among the practices that were being “repressed on the street” while being shown in museums, according to Sullivan, were scarification and tattooing—not heretofore recognized as important Anglo-American traditions. Sullivan's sinister interpretation of natural history museums clashes with their philanthropic origins. Such institutions, their advocates argued, would allow the urban poor, increasingly imprisoned by large industrial cities, to enjoy the “refreshment, humanism, and inspiration” of nature, as one nineteenth-century proponent wrote.

Sullivan shares Foucault's contempt for civilization, which he characterizes as “quote-unquote ‘civilization.’” He also has fully imbibed the postmodern academy's skep-

ticism about science (though of course he continues to enjoy its benefits daily). He announced breezily upon his arrival that the “western-scientific-anthropological world view is merely one more alternative way of knowing and encoding the world, no more valuable or accurate, no less ideological or culture-bound, than any other.”

A critic espousing such contempt for the achievements of Western civilization is poorly suited to help lead an institution so intimately related to the “western-scientific-anthropological world view.” Indeed, Sullivan almost didn't accept the position. As he confided to Frank Talbot, the museum director at the time, “I was so frightened and discouraged by the overwhelming needs I see [at the museum] and the seeming indifference of the visitors.” Those annoying visitors, he explained, “don't want to be engaged, empowered, or even educated, [but] just want to be distracted . . . from the dailiness, the tedium, the fear of their lives.” But courageous and self-sacrificing fellow that he is, Sullivan manfully accepted the job at the largest research museum in the country, explaining grandiloquently: “We must affirm life, have the courage to name what is intolerable to us, and act against it.”

Sullivan immediately set to work “erasing [the museum's] racist belief system.” He assembled a gender-race bias task force to “critique exhibits and produce policy and practices manuals on Gender and Race Equity.” Faced with budget limits, Sullivan was unable to tear down and replace everything he found offensive about the museum; his second-best solution was the so-called “dilemma labels” (since removed) placed next to the dioramas. “If you couldn't change the exhibits, can you make an exhibit out of the exhibit, and show the cultural values in science?” Sullivan explains, demonstrating his close familiarity with self-reflexive postmodern practice.

Ironically, many of the museum's naturalists had complained for years of *scientific* inaccuracies in some of the exhibition labels, but their complaints went ignored.

Science has no constituency, however; politics does.

Sullivan also acted on his announced intention to grant to “minority cultures . . . access to collections and meaningful influence on interpretive points of view.” Upon his arrival at the museum, he started a “dialogue” with a radically Afrocentric “community” group that had long complained of the museum’s alleged racism. Sullivan invited the group Tu-Wa-Moja to advise the museum regarding planned revisions to its Africa Hall and Human Evolution exhibit.

The result was predictable. The group made life extremely difficult for the archaeologists and anthropologists who had been ordered to find common ground with it; but little else was accomplished. The museum tried to defuse Tu-Wa-Moja’s objections to the Africa Hall by putting “dilemma labels” on the exhibits, but the group was not satisfied. In a remarkable symbol of the new museology, Sullivan simply shut down the hall. “Tearing down the hall was a way to build trust,” he explains. Leaving it up while the new hall was in development would have damaged the Smithsonian’s credibility, Sullivan concluded, because the “community had great mistrust about whether the Smithsonian would redo it in an inclusive way.” As a final gesture of “trust,” Sullivan allowed Tu-Wa-Moja to film the shuttered hall for its Afrocentric propaganda materials; Leonard Jeffries served as *de facto* master of ceremonies. The moral of the story is that in order to stoke an ethnic interest group’s self-esteem, the new museology demands that everyone else be denied the opportunity to learn from the Smithsonian’s collections.

To his credit, Sullivan has not pressured the museum’s curators to accept Tu-Wa-Moja’s views on the African origins of everything. But why was the group invited in the first place? What did this group of Washington residents know about evolution to justify their advising a team of

physical anthropologists, with all the extra labor that that interaction cost the museum, or about Africa to justify their advising cultural anthropologists? The answer, of course, lies in skin color—more specifically, in the racial essentialism that holds that a young, black Washington male is an expert on all things African.

The “community consultation” imperative that brought Tu-Wa-Moja into the Natural History Museum has cast a wider net than just local Afrocentrics. Over one hundred people are advising the museum on its new Africa Hall, most of them black. Again, the process is extremely time-consuming. Mary Jo Arnoldi, an African curator at the museum, explained why the community consultations are necessary: “Museums are becoming aware that in a postmodern world, the people you’re representing say: how come you’re the expert? Sullivan’s only echoing what the academy has been talking about for a long time.”

The new Africa Hall will be impeccably postmodern. It will tell African “stories” with African “voices.” Its theme is not Africa *per se*, but African identity: over half the hall will be devoted to the “African diaspora”—peoples of African origin living elsewhere. Geographical divisions of Africa will be minimally included as a grudging concession to visitors who expect it. The new museology has little use for the traditional organizing tools of natural history, such as geography or species classification, which are seen, no doubt, as relics of the “western-scientific-anthropological world view.” But what is a natural history museum if not the record of the interaction of humans with a particular patch of the natural world? In an era when Americans’ geographical and historical knowledge is shrinking into nothingness, a deemphasis on geography is dangerous.

The old Africa Hall was criticized in the press and the “community” as showing a timeless Africa of quaint or barbaric customs; curators of the new Africa Hall are determined to avoid such charges. “We have to make sure to let people know there are as

many Africans in science labs as are working in the fields," says Mary Jo Arnoldi. The self-esteem imperative seems to have over-ridden truth here: given the backward state of Africa's still largely rural economy, it seems highly unlikely that Africa is producing as many scientists as subsistence farmers. Oddly, when identity groups seek to legitimate themselves, they draw on traditional Western criteria of accomplishment, such as science, despite the cultural left's disdain for such alienating forms of thought.

To date, Sullivan has been better at shutting things down than putting them up. Occasionally, his revisionist agenda has met with stiff internal opposition. He had tried to remove from the museum's rotunda its famous charging elephant, for example—as a hunting trophy, a symbol for Sullivan of white capitalist aggression. But a passionate protest by the museum's animal scientists shelved the plan. Anyone who cares for museum aesthetics can be glad for that, since Sullivan's suggestions for a replacement included a "large animated programmable globe," illustrating the cardinal truth that while the new museum bureaucrat may be chock full of political opinions, he is absolutely devoid of taste.

But there are large changes in the offing, and readers with a love of traditional natural history museums are advised to visit the Smithsonian soon, before it's too late. Eventually, all of the museum's enchanting human culture halls will be torn down, to make way for the new museological extravaganza "Changing Cultures in a Changing World." This overarching cultural anthropology exhibit will focus on three or four big ideas about "cultural change"—one of the watchwords, along with "global change," of the new thinking.

The ideology of "cultural change" is the antithesis of everything natural history museums once stood for. The naturalists and anthropologists who created those museums wanted to present the vast wonders of the earth in a logical, coherent fashion; they had an enormous respect for details and

facts. The Smithsonian's glorious dioramas—the creation of scientists with obvious artistic flair—gave visitors a panoramic, but specific, view of the world's cultures. But museums no longer strive for comprehensiveness or specificity. Instead, the educator's favorite "idea" is paramount. "We have the space to tell four to five potent stories," says Sullivan. "All the dioramas will be gone, we're not worried about covering the same ground." There is considerable irony to this breezy indifference to coverage. Native American activists have attacked the museum for only showing *one* tribe of Eskimos; now, there will likely be none. (In the interim, to respond to Native American complaints, Sullivan will put a video next to the Eskimo diorama showing contemporary Aleut life—a gross and unconscionable violation of the aesthetics of the Americas Hall.)

If the theme of "cultural change" does not highlight specific places and peoples, what then is it all about? Like most everything in postmodern politics it is about "identity." But there is a twist. "Every visitor [to the new hall] should find something about themselves," says Sullivan. Future visitors should find that they are "the culmination of cultural change that makes them the same as every other visitor. They will not meet the exotic other here, they will meet themselves." The unspoken agenda here is that all cultures are equal, and influence each other equally.

The Natural History Museum provides one further contrast between the old and the new museology. The old museology created places of refuge, where visitors could contemplate nature in stillness. The new museology abhors stillness; the key word is "interactivity." The new museum halls are starting to resemble video arcades: recorded voices drone over and over from all corners, TV screens run the same video endlessly, and computers beep and blink before jamming up. For all Sullivan and his ilk's professed distaste for "rational-logical-technocratic society," they are absolutely besotted with gadgetry. An exhibit on

marine ecosystems features several video screens embedded in fake rock and tacky plywood, as well as an LED display. On either side of the cluttered exhibit are the traditional bird and mammal halls, featuring such endearing vitrines as “Mammal Parachutes” and “Concealing Coloration.” The brilliance and variety of the animals, many collected by Theodore Roosevelt, makes the point about “biodiversity” far more effectively than the beeping, whirring technologies next door. With so splendid a species collection, why would the curators opt for the simulacrum of video?

“Interactive” museum technologies are supposed to allow visitors to “create the meaning” of the exhibit, or, less pretentiously, learn at their own speed. But the new technology is about as interactive as a factory time clock. Typically, the viewer punches a few keys on a computer screen to access data, and the computer spews it out. The answer was predetermined; there is no reason the information could not have been presented in straight graphic format. But the new technology allows curators to feel up-to-date with the information age.

To be sure, there is only so much a new museologist at an old museum can do. Despite the best of revisionist intentions, not all the old exhibits can be junked immediately. To achieve a perfect embodiment of the new museology, one must start from a clean slate. What luck for Secretary Adams that such a slate existed—the last undeveloped piece of land on the Mall. On it, Adams decreed the erection of the National Museum of the American Indian, planned for completion in 2001. The project has sucked money out of existing parts of the Smithsonian, but from Adams’s perspective, nothing was too good for the museum, for it would seal his reputation as protector of ethnic identity groups. The American Indian Museum provides an ominous harbinger of museums to come.

The museum was born in racial animus. Its administrator declared early on: “If we do not take responsibility for the work, the

white people will win the day. . . . We cannot let some arrogant, racist, or stupid people defeat us.” The museum is supposed to be not just *about* America Indians, but by them and for them as well. Museum planners describe American Indians as their “constituency,” an overtly political concept. Naturally, a Native American is designing the building; he renews himself for further battles by retreating to his “sweat lodge” in Rock Creek Park.

Anyone eager for a foretaste of this pure new museological creation can get it in the Smithsonian’s historic Arts and Industries Building. There, a preview exhibition, predictably called “Stories of the People,” is installed. And what a preview it is! The first jolt comes from the wall labels, which use the first-person plural throughout: “As tribal people, . . . we are wonderfully diverse yet essentially similar”; “our Cherokee story is one of balance—men and women, animals and plants, complementing each other’s lives.” Had a white curator presumed to use the first-person plural, the postmodernists would be busy deploring the “construction” of the viewer as “the Other.”

The second jolt from “Stories of the People” is the embarrassing vacuousness of the accompanying texts, many of which seem transcribed from Chinese fortune cookies. “Apache culture is adaptive and reflects the times,” reads one. The conceit of “living in balance” with nature pervades the exhibition, though one does wonder about the buffalo run off cliffs by Indians: did they, too, feel in perfect harmony with nature? Even “men and women” lived in balance, as the Cherokee text quoted above claims. Let us recall that that balance consisted of the women doing hard labor domestically while the men hunted and went to war. If an eighteenth-century burgher had made a similar claim for his domestic arrangements, he would be impaled on the stake of false consciousness.

Finally, there is the overtly political nature of the show. The exhibition is a piece of advocacy from start to finish, arguing the validity of Indian legal claims against the

U.S. government. The following statement is typical in its clumsy juxtaposition of folksy English translations and hard-nosed legal claims:

Today, the environment is not as rich as it was before the House on the Water People came. Conflicts between our Tribe and the House on the Water People still exist. The harvest and management of fisheries is a contentious issue, despite court decisions affirming our right to half of the fish in our waters.

Although construction of its new multi-million-dollar taxpayer-financed building on the Mall proceeds apace, there may be little to fill it when it is completed. The museum is depleting its collections under the aegis of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, which governs the return of native remains to tribes. In essence, the museum sent around a shopping list of goodies, asking tribes if they wanted to make a claim on its collections. The claims are becoming increasingly attenuated. Anthropologist Clement Meighan laments: "Adams sold us out. The institution is spending to destroy its collections."

Like the Natural History Museum, the National Museum of American History is firmly tied to the Smithsonian's past; and like the Natural History Museum, it has just as surely betrayed it. Repository for over a century of the nation's tangible heritage, the museum is conducting a fierce revisionist campaign. Like the other Smithsonian museums, it has taken its cue directly from the multicultural-mad, victim-celebrating universities.

The collections at American History originated when the U.S. Patent Office transferred the contents of its National Cabinet of Curiosities to the Smithsonian in 1858. Included were George Washington's tent and the Star-Spangled Banner. The collections got another boost in 1876, from the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. The present museum, a windowless battlement possessing all the charm of an

airplane terminal, opened in 1964 as the National Museum of History and Technology. Its ground floor, now featuring a noisy, high-tech exhibit about industrial materials, resembles a food court in a large suburban mall. The museum was ominously renamed the American History Museum in 1980, confirming a change of emphasis that was already taking place inside it. While some wonderful traditional exhibits of great hulking machines still stand, the social historical exhibits take an attitude toward technology that is typically ironic and skeptical.

Anyone looking for political history in the museum will be disappointed. It features nothing on the American Revolution or the constitutional conventions, nothing that embodies the ideals that animated the United States. America's presidents? You'll find their shadowy images sticking out from underneath the First Ladies' portraits arrayed across a wall. And tucked back in a tiny case behind an escalator are some presidential possessions, such as Woodrow Wilson's golf clubs and Lincoln's gold cane. Good luck finding the case, however.

Instead of political history, the museum focuses on a congeries of identity groups. Two themes emerge: America's ever-growing inequalities, and the unpleasantness of white people. Take any point in time in the Smithsonian's America, and you will find shocking inequalities that only get worse. After the Revolution: "The gulf between rich and poor, powerful and powerless . . . did not vanish after 1776. . . . Whatever their race or gender, working Philadelphians found that the Revolution had not solved the problems of social and economic inequality." During the nineteenth-century industrial revolution: there was increasing "economic inequality." Turn of the century: "By the 1890s, . . . growing contrasts of wealth and poverty, and rigid racial barriers had created urgent social problems." Modern era: "It is much easier in the United States to be decently dressed than it is to be decently housed, fed or doctored" (quoting socialist Michael Harrington).

What is most striking about the Smith-

sonian's survey of American inequality through the ages is its utter lack of historical awareness. The curators bring to the past no historical context; they observe and judge the past as if it were simultaneous with the present. The postrevolutionary period was characterized by "social and economic inequality," say the curators. Compared to what? Judged by contemporary European standards, America was the least class-bound society in the world, and would remain so for two centuries. Titles, primogeniture, feudal rights, strict distinction between the nobility and the merchant and servant classes—*those* were the indices of eighteenth-century inequality, and America had cast them off.

Similarly inapt is the observation that during the Progressive era, the "rigid structures of American society were difficult to overcome in building cross-class and interracial alliances." That is an agenda straight out of the 1990s multicultural campus, with its vacuous talk of class consciousness and rainbow coalitions; it has nothing to do with the Progressive agenda.

Nowhere is the Smithsonian curators' self-absorption more apparent than in their treatment of "women's issues." Barbara Clark Smith, a curator, notes scornfully that late eighteenth-century Philadelphians "continued to assume that women of both races would and should be dependent on men." Well, of course they did—"women's lib" was still one hundred and eighty years away! A young student reading such comments will nevertheless come away with the impression that the American past was a shamefully inadequate place.

Even the language used to describe the past is self-absorbed. The "settlement house" movement, wherein social workers helped immigrants assimilate, "enabled women to use gender concepts as a source of empowerment," coos an exhibition on women's social movements. The statement would have been absolutely incomprehensible to an early twentieth-century citizen; it is still meaningless today, rendering it a bona fide product of the academy.

The Smithsonian's assault on the American past doesn't end with its obsessive harping on social and economic inequality. The museum has a far more specific agenda to pursue, and that is against whites. An exhibition on postcolonial society suggests that American history was formed of equal parts white, black, and Indian influence, and a good thing, too, because black and Indian cultures, according to the exhibit, were superior in every way. The first generation of American citizens were social-climbing, ruthless, obsessed with status and power, indifferent to equality, sexist, and, of course, viciously hypocritical in their embrace of slavery. Their victory over Britain was due to the "labors of the African-Americans they enslaved," not, apparently, to their zeal to found a new, classless society.

A display of a Virginia planter's parlor says it all. Droning incessantly above the barren room is a recorded male voice that interprets the space. "Every aspect [of the room] is designed for social advancement," the tape sneers. "The construction of the staircase was *fashionable*, [long pause], *expensive* [long pause], *showy*." The narrator practically spits out the words: "This is more than just a *room*; this is an elaborate proclamation of prosperity and ambition, the public face of a *man*, [who is] part of a fiercely competitive social system." The planter and his neighbors, the narrator sniffs, used "every occasion to prove themselves *better* [pause], *richer* [pause], more *powerful* than each other."

It is no surprise, then, when we learn later in the exhibit that the planter had murdered his wife. *This* is the family the Smithsonian chose to highlight as a typical early Southern family! Not only were the white citizens slavers and social-climbers, they were also domestic murderers. Now there undoubtedly was a pecking order in postcolonial society. But there is little reason to suppose that early Americans were more socially aggrandizing than potlatching "native peoples" or a king in a slave-trading African dynasty.

The Smithsonian's selection of a New England family is also telling. Did it choose one with a glorious revolutionary past? Not a chance. It selects an opponent of equality and possible Royalist. Merchant Samuel Cotton "disapproved of the notions of equality that were spreading in the north-east." Not only a reactionary, Cotton is also a greedy capitalist: an audio tape ceaselessly reenacts a court hearing that found him guilty of profiteering off the Revolution by overcharging for sugar, molasses, salt, and rum.

Fortunately, there is an escape from this backbiting, petty society: we can visit the Seneca Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy. And suddenly, we reencounter the curatorial "we": "Our ancestors considered it a great transgression to reject the council of their women." Apparently, the Indians deserve a "voice," and the whites do not. This carefully chosen female-centric aspect of Iroquois society contrasts sharply with eighteenth-century white society, wherein women, Clark notes, had more rights as widows than as wives. Whom is she kidding? Does Clark really believe that "gender roles" were less rigid among the bloody Iroquois than in England or America? The "rights of women," a concept even then being debated in England, would have been incomprehensible to the Indians.

There isn't a single myth about the nobility of the oppressed to which Clark doesn't subscribe. "Most African-Americans, Native Americans, and women white Americans . . . studied nature in order to work in harmony with it, not to control it," she declares breathlessly. If Native Americans and blacks did not "control nature," it is because they did not possess the technology and scientific knowledge to do so. African-Americans performed voodoo rituals with animals. Was that more "harmonious" than cultivating livestock?

But the Smithsonian knows no such ambiguity. It presents the so-called "systematic spirit—or deep faith in the power of reason and science" as white man's religion, no

more efficacious or valid than the lore of illiterate peoples. Astoundingly, it puts the onus on *white Europeans* to understand native cultures, not vice versa: "Because of cultural bias, Europeans frequently were unable to comprehend the systems by which the knowledge passed from teacher to student in these traditional cultures, and the content of that knowledge." This is balderdash. First of all, if Europeans were "unable to comprehend" the "knowledge systems" of traditional cultures, it was undoubtedly because the high priests who presided over those "knowledge systems" kept them shrouded in mystery, not only to outsiders, but to members of the native culture itself. The notion of the public availability of knowledge and scientific research was a Western creation and a great tool of equality, to boot. It was utterly foreign to primitive cultures, who understood long before Foucault that knowledge (and even the appearance of knowledge) was power.

Second, if "cultural bias" prevented Europeans from understanding the occult mysteries of native "knowledge systems," fairness would require mentioning that illiteracy and scientific ignorance prevented native cultures from understanding Western "knowledge systems." But the Smithsonian sees the deficiency only on the whites' side.

The notion that native peoples lived in "harmony" while whites lived in conflict with the natural world pervades the exhibit. A label in a case on popular science announces darkly: "The air pump subjected nature to unnatural forces." There is no room in Clark's intellectual universe for the joy of experimentation; in her scheme, eighteenth-century popular interest in physics smacks of imperialism, aggression, and probably also racism and sexism. Eli Whitney's cotton gin, an ingenious invention, is simply labelled: "An Engine of Slavery."

The romanticization of native peoples continues in another American History exhibit: "New Mexico: An American Encounter," about the interaction of American Indians and Hispanics, and their fight

against white imperialism. The exhibition states that Indian tribes take in tourists because of their “desire to share”; apparently the aggressive marketing of Indian artifacts springs from a similarly disinterested motive. A full-length mirror shaped as a human with a camera hanging from the neck (actually, the camera has been stolen, leaving just a plastic mount) silently accuses the museum visitor of “objectifying the Other.” Again, no one is forcing the tourist industry on the Indians. The show glosses over the often brutal missionizing of the Indians by the Spaniards.

Smirking irony is a favorite conceit of academic demystifiers, and it pervades the Smithsonian. It entails liberal use of scare quotes, or implicit scare quotes, to debunk concepts that twenty years ago were quite unproblematic. Echoing Robert Sullivan’s theme that middle-class manners are tools of power, the American History Museum questions the most basic mechanisms of American history: assimilation. A section called “Social Service v. Social Control” in the women’s reform movement exhibition argues that

middle class reformers . . . often imposed their concepts of the “American Way” on people. . . . Teaching immigrants and the less fortunate how to “better” themselves involved making judgments of moral and cultural “superiority.”

For those immigrants who came over without a proper sense of hygiene, who beat their wives, who took their children out of school to work, that “bettering” process was essential to their social progress. But the adolescent sees all forms of authority as oppressive.

The cynical debunking of core American beliefs doesn’t always use scare quotes. Another favorite ploy is the “Americans believed” construction, which introduces a note of irony into what are generally unobjectionable views. A show on the American industrial revolution from 1790 to 1860 subtly mocks Americans’ enthusiasm for the

new industrial inventions: Americans “believed that economic progress depended on technological advance.” Why is this noteworthy, unless we are to understand it as a bizarre belief? But Americans saw daily the impact of technology on the economy. Nineteenth-century Americans’ belief in the efficacy of gifted individuals is another howler to the Smithsonian: “Many Americans believed . . . that progress was the work of a few great inventors.” One can almost hear curator Steve Lubar’s guffaws as he wrote this. A sophisticated social historian such as Lubar understands that such concepts as “greatness” and even the “individual” are just political fictions designed to conceal oppressive power relations.

Curator Lubar also singles out for implicit scorn the “widespread [nineteenth-century] assumption that work was good for people.” How repressive, we murmur sympathetically. Even worse, “‘houses of industry’ helped to keep the poor busy and out of trouble.” How much more humane are the ready welfare benefits that cultivate a huge class of non-working, dependent, and often criminal people!

No museum has better employed academically inspired scorn, however, than Air and Space, and nowhere is the effect more jarring. If ever there were a testament to the power of science, engineering, and mental mastery, it is the Air and Space Museum. Yet as the recent Enola Gay debacle revealed, the museum is now populated by curators and, until recently, a director who sought to debunk technology and military prowess. Pilots and former military men once dominated the museum; today, academic historians rule the place. Secretary Adams orchestrated this change, to bring the museum into line with the academy, which had long derided Air and Space for its allegedly celebratory attitude toward aeronautic technology.

The results of this academic incursion were in long before the Enola Gay controversy. A curator recalls the heady pre-Enola Gay days, when the public hadn’t yet

noticed the changes underway in the museum: "There was a sense of optimism in the 1980s and 1990s that we could stretch boundaries and do cultural history." A show on World War I fighter pilots argues that Americans have been hoodwinked into a naïve romanticization of air war. Displays of commercial detritus with pilot themes drive home the point that Americans can't tell the difference, say, between Snoopy in his Red Baron flying gear or a Red Baron pizza box and the realities of war. This dour "deconstruction" of popular culture comes right from the academy. A previous exhibit—a wildly popular show on "Star Trek"—also drew on academic fads to reveal the searing social critique in the TV series. The important point about the exhibit devoted to "Star Trek" is not that it represented a crass pandering to popular culture (although it did), but that it found in the series a criticism of racism, sexism, militarism, and, in an earlier draft of the exhibition's script, the Vietnam War.

But nothing, obviously, can match the enormity of the Enola Gay disaster. The true outrage of the project was not that it used spurious analyses to second-guess the military necessity of the atomic bomb, or that its authors chose the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II to propound their revisionist views, or even that it portrayed the Japanese as quasi-victims during the war they started with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The true outrage lies in the disgusting condescension and contempt shown to the public and to the war's veterans by the Smithsonian personnel, from Adams on down.

The abortive exhibition presented Hiroshima not as the conclusion of World War II, but as the start of the arms race. To Martin Harwit, director of the Air and Space Museum, the conjunction of the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of the war was purely coincidental. This perspective on the bomb set the stage for the follies to come, guaranteeing that the veterans and the curators would be talking past each other.

From the start, Smithsonian officials held themselves out as the only people sensitive enough to understand the horrors of nuclear war and the anxieties of the nuclear age. Responding to one of the many World War II veterans campaigning tirelessly for the restoration and exhibition of the Enola Gay, Secretary Adams intoned piously: "Decent respect for the opinions of mankind" requires us also to touch on the demonstrated horror and yawning future risk of the age that the Enola Gay helped to inaugurate." Adams's condescension was not lost on the vet, who shot back that Adams was a "Washington satrap."

Harwit easily matched Adams for self-righteousness. Hand-picked by Adams to bring a critical perspective on strategic bombing to the museum, Harwit, an astrophysicist, was the first director of the museum without a flying or military background. Writing to Japan's ambassador in Washington, Harwit revealed his deep contempt for the public: "Unless the public is willing to understand the events that led to the bombings, and the terrible destruction they wrought, the most valuable lessons that can be learned from history will be lost." The gall of this message is nearly unfathomable. Harwit posits the public as his quasi-adversary, determined to hold on to its blind ignorance in the face of his proffered enlightenment. It is the height of arrogance for Harwit to present himself and his curators, none of whom served in the war, as the repositories of wisdom regarding the "events that led to the bombings."

Even more offensive than the museum's condescension toward the public was its contempt for the veterans. In statement after statement, the museum's personnel caricatured the vets as an annoying, insignificant, self-engrossed interest group in conflict with the public good. In one of the most explosive statements during the public controversy, a curator named Tom Crouch wrote to Harwit: "Do you want an exhibit to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to

think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both." In his self-exculpatory book, Harwit adopts the same stance, alleging that the vets merely sought to "satisfy their nostalgia" or to be celebrated.

Only someone who had never served in a war could characterize the vets' desire for a public history as "nostalgia" or "feel-good" therapy. Harwit and his curators exemplify the offensive self-righteousness most often found in academia—that of a generation that has lived without sacrifice and that sneers at tradition. Contrary to the Smithsonian's dismissive rhetoric, the vets showed themselves throughout the battle as extraordinarily eloquent, informed, and morally wise.

But few at the Smithsonian seem to have learned anything from the episode (except the current secretary, Michael Heyman, who, upon succeeding Adams in 1994, canceled the original exhibition and fired Harwit.) Throughout the Institution, curators and historians stew about the grievous injury done to their intellectual freedom by the cancellation of the show, and complain darkly about continuing censorship. The resentment is strongest, naturally, at Air and Space, which is still licking its wounds. "The outlook in this place is bleak; we can't do anything that's critical of anything, we're so constrained by the political right wing," one curator fumed to me. Note his assumption: his primary goal is to be "critical," not to share knowledge or edify. But even more remarkable is the curator's shocking lack of respect for experience and seniority. "A bunch of seventy-five-year-olds—two world War II vets—are running this place now," he complained, who "bring the mindset of that generation."

Next up at Air and Space: a show on the *Star Wars* trilogy, one of the last Harwit projects still on the books. A bid for popular appeal, to be sure, but don't be surprised to find trenchant social criticism served up as well—perhaps a paeon to diversity and sensitivity. In line with the redressive mission of the Smithsonian, Air

and Space is also planning an exhibit on the black experience in aviation, following the precedent of a 1994 show on a female aerial acrobat that demonstrated that young girls really *can* triumph against the sexist odds!

If many of the Air and Space curators seek to debunk the alleged myths of flight technology, many curators at the American Art Museum, housed in the splendid neo-classical Old Patent Office Building, are determined to debunk art itself. Ideally, some believe, there would cease to be any distinction between art—what one curator snidely calls "so-called paintings"—and ephemera such as political cartoons. All would be marshalled to the great project of tearing down America's ideals.

Mention of the sublime to some curators provokes a recoil of distaste. In a recent essay on art curating, curator William Truettner scoffs: Museum visitors used to believe that works of art "disregard everyday life in favor of expressing what was profound and lasting about the human spirit." Such aesthetic idealism is repugnant to Truettner; he wants to "bring art museum visitors back to earth [and] make them believe that works have more-limited [*sic*] meanings."

Truettner brought the public thuddingly to earth in his much-criticized "The West as America" exhibit of 1991. The show argued that the great heroic canvases of the Western expansion were really about Eastern capitalism, ethnic strife, and greed. Truettner, who has read his Derrida, finds exploitation and despair in the most peaceful of canvases, for the very absence of social strife and oppression from a canvas "has the ironic effect of calling them back to life," he argues.

Truettner's heavy-handed decoding of art violates the interpretive code he professes to follow. Mouthing platitudes about the open-ended nature of meaning, Truettner's interpretations admit of no variation over time; they are presented as the definitive decoding of the canvas. Though he invokes a populist philosophy—everyone can un-

derstand art—his bizarre allegorical readings of paintings must appear far more arcane to an average viewer than a formal or moral analysis. Like his colleagues in the academy, he approaches canvases with a checklist of politically correct “issues”: if a painting contains a woman, that’s a “gender issue.” If it contains a black person, that’s a “race issue.” If it contains a woman *and* a black person, it’s time to cash in. Analyzing an 1861 historical allegory called *The Founding of Maryland*, Truettner fills out his scorecard: “The demure colonial wife, her head covered by a blue shawl, looks askance at the three bare-breasted Indian women, raising not only racial but gender issues.” If the painting had been half as skilled, presumably the analysis would be identical: the “issues” would be duly noted, and not a word said about the aesthetic qualities of the work.

In the odd world of the museum, curators regard shows as failures if the public innocently enjoys them. A recent show on the nineteenth-century landscape painter Thomas Cole sought to portray the paintings as a reactionary critique of Jacksonian democracy. “We got nowhere with the show,” laments one curator. “Visitors just didn’t get it.” The visitor comment books contained such responses as “Great show! Wonderful paintings!” “Do more shows like this!”—a source of curatorial embarrassment.

A forthcoming exhibition scheduled for March 1999 continues the museum’s project of debunking American history and culture. A companion to “The West as America,” it will focus on late-nineteenth-century images of New England. Such images, often idyllic, the curators will argue, represent a desperate attempt of whites to hold on to an ideal Anglo-Protestant America, in a time of black migration from the South and ethnic migration from Europe. What else is new?

If aesthetic values are meaningless and transitory, the museum finds enormous value in identity politics. A spate of recent contemporary art shows focused on eth-

nicity and “political orientation.” Serving up the worst atrocities from SoHo, the museum has displayed repulsive installations and tasteless postmodern junk art, such as Pepon Osorro’s tacky chandeliers constructed from plastic beads, tiny soccer balls, and cheap knickknacks. As Osorro explains: “My work is socially relevant because that is the need I see in the community.” How about the need for a good grammar-school education in using the English language? Isn’t that socially relevant?

The museum’s acquisitions policy is just as bad, causing some traditional curators to despair that the Smithsonian is selling off its heritage to buy politically correct junk. The Institution’s race- and ethnicity-based acquisitions policy is part of a much broader diversity drive. Adams made diversity the centerpiece of his tenure, ordering museum directors to bring in a staff that was more “representative” of the country. “Sometimes these hires worked out, others were dead on their feet,” recalls a curator at Natural History. The deadwood is the most likely to have survived, given the difficulties of firing Federal employees. The only practical recourse available to a manager of an incompetent employee is to find an unwitting supervisor in another museum and try to palm the employee off on him.

Adams also encouraged the formation of identity-based employee advocacy groups. These have increasingly flexed their muscles regarding the content of exhibitions. The Hispanic lobby seems to be in the ascendancy today. In 1993, Secretary Adams authorized the formation of a Task Force on Latino Issues, charged, in essence, to prove that the Smithsonian is guilty of discrimination. The Task Force was chaired by Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, one of the most radical Hispanic advocacy groups in the country.

The Task Force performed exactly as expected. A year after its formation, it published “Willful Neglect,” an extraordinarily dishonest report charging the Smithsonian with *deliberately* excluding Latinos from its collections and staff. Count one of the in-

dictment was the absence of a separate museum dedicated to Latinos—ethnically coded museums have now become the primary litmus test of the Smithsonian's ethnic good faith. Like all arguments for Hispanic power, "Willful Neglect" cast a wide net in its definition of Hispanic, including Mexican-, Puerto Rican-, Cuban-, Dominican-, Central American-, South American-, and Spanish-Americans, despite the wide cultural differences between those groups. When I asked the Smithsonian's new counsel for Latino affairs, Miguel Bretos, if these groups really constituted a single identity, he responded with an amazing reinterpretation of American history. A common Hispanic identity was "emerging rapidly," Bretos said: "The American tradition of *E Pluribus Unum* is taking root in the Hispanic community; there is an increasing sense of a common fund of culture that cuts across tribes." That, in a nutshell, describes American ideals today—assimilation no longer means assimilation to a common American identity, but to a heightened ethnic identity.

"Willful Neglect" worked its anticipated magic. The Smithsonian created an entire office dedicated to Hispanic advocacy within the Institution, headed by Bretos. "Basically, Bretos wants a gallery in every museum devoted to Hispanics," says a curator of natural history who has had repeated dealings with him. In a particularly cowardly move, the Smithsonian changed the name of Bretos's office from Latino Affairs to Community Affairs, trying to cover up its partisan nature, though no one within the Institution is fooled.

But the bureaucratic spawn of "Willful Neglect" spilled over beyond the Community Affairs office. Secretary Heyman, in continuing token of his ethnic good faith, empowered two high-level panels to study employment and affirmative action policy, on the one hand, and programming and acquisitions, on the other. Their reports will undoubtedly find grievous gaps in the Smithsonian's efforts to achieve a "diverse" museum.

All this is pretty impressive fallout from a report based on misrepresentation and virtual falsehood. Even its authors backpedaled wildly when confronted with its misstatements. "Willful Neglect" charges the Smithsonian with deliberately failing to hire an ethnically proportionate Hispanic workforce. A chart grimly documents the absence of Hispanic curators. Such a charge makes sense only if there is a pool of Hispanic qualified museologists upon which the Smithsonian should have been drawing. I asked Bretos if such a pool exists. He responded: "It's relatively small, which is part of the difficulty of making sure that all the voices are represented." More accurately, the number of Hispanic art history or archeology or aerospace Ph.D.s is probably close to zero, given the continuing problem of low academic achievement among Hispanics. What about lower-level staff, also a target of scathing criticism in the report? "The Smithsonian is at a disadvantage in Washington in attracting Latinos," admitted Bretos, "because it's a first-generation immigrant community." In other words, few qualified Hispanics for clerical work either.

How, then, can you charge the Smithsonian with *willful* neglect, I asked Bretos. He dodged the query. "The question is one of focus: how do you present the narrative of America?" he replied. He laughed: "I wrote poisonous pages regarding the Smithsonian Institution." No wonder he's laughing: these days, there is no better way to end up in a sinecure than to blast an institution with false charges of racism.

The report's allegation that the Institution's collections ignore Hispanic material is just as spurious. Smithsonian archaeologists have been lovingly collecting and documenting culture in the Southwest almost since the Institution's founding; a curator at American History has specialized in Hispanic-American material since 1965. And again, the report's authors now take a far different line. "The collections from Latin America are incredible," says Bretos. "We are one of the largest Latin American collections in botany and zoology."

The precedent set by “Willful Neglect” is ominous. If the Smithsonian capitulates so spinelessly to ethnic extortion, a parade of other ethnic lobbies will be sure to follow the model of the Hispanics, splintering the Institution further into just so many grievance groups.

Ironically, the only place one can consistently find traditional curating in the Smithsonian these days is in the non-Western art museums—the Sackler and Freer galleries of Asian art and the National Museum of African Art. All three are elegant and understated, displaying art and even ritual artifacts as aesthetic objects, rather than as social texts. Apparently, the concepts of beauty and the sublime are still appropriate for non-Western cultures, while the West is busily deconstructing itself.

The Smithsonian’s future is not auspicious. On the positive side, Secretary Heyman, a former chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, is far more sensitive to the commemorative, celebratory function of a national museum than Robert McCormick Adams ever was, and he has openly questioned the advocacy curating favored by the Smithsonian’s academically inspired professionals. His cancellation of the Enola Gay exhibit was welcome. Yet there remain many reasons for apprehension. Heyman vehemently promoted racial quotas at Berkeley; he is continuing race-conscious policies at the Smithsonian, putting further out of reach the ideal of a national museum that transcends race and ethnic differences.

Moreover, Heyman’s proposed solution to the controversies that have scorched the Institution recently misdiagnoses the problem. In a speech last year at Georgetown Law Center, Heyman argued that issue-oriented curators should follow the model of the legal system and present both sides of a political debate: “Presenting at least two sides of an important issue, and letting the visitors know exactly what is evidence and what is interpretation, can only enhance broader public understanding.”

But the problem with the politicized exhibitions at the Smithsonian is not that they present only one side of an issue; the problem is the manufacture of such specious “issues” in the first place. When William Truettner is spotting his race and gender issues, what possible “other side” could be presented? When the American History Museum sets out to multiculturalize and relativize Anglo-American culture, when it deliberately selects unsympathetic white families to contrast with the virtuous natives, no counterargument is even possible, because the ground of debate is already so skewed. To accept the terms of debate is already to have lost.

Short of a total housecleaning of staff, there is little that can save the Smithsonian from being further engulfed by the poisonous trends of identity politics and post-modern theory. These chic academic assumptions are by now thoroughly ingrained in the Smithsonian’s bureaucracy. Ultimately, only a change in the powerful culture of universities can restore America’s public culture.

Letter from Moscow

by Christian Caryl

In the city of Kazan, on the upper reaches of the Volga River, I met Nukh, whose name, in Arabic, denotes the Old Testament prophet who survived the Flood. The name has a deeper significance when one reflects that Nukh, in his early twenties, was born in the old Soviet Union in a Siberian city called Chelyabinsk, in a place and time that offered little room for his religion. Islam proved defiant, and now Nukh is free to attend mosque, to live a Muslim life, even to study in a newly opened *medraseh*, a religious college, in this city 1500 miles from his hometown.

We met during Ramadan. I sat in the back of the mosque as Nukh and his fellow students knelt toward Mecca for sunset prayers; afterward we went down to the basement for a hearty meal to break the day's fast. Then we walked a few blocks back to the *medraseh*, a run-down building beleaguered by snowdrifts; the gilded domes of an Orthodox church across the street loomed in the twilight. On the second floor, in a dorm room just big enough for six metal bedframes and two rickety desks, Nukh and his classmates engaged me in a long disputation about Islam and its place in the world (interspersed with a few questions about Michael Jackson and the writings of the great American philosopher Dale Carnegie). They served tea Russian-style, filling each cup with hot water and brew from separate kettles, and offered slices of bread with butter and honey.

Afterwards Nukh walked me back to the tram stop, his big fur hat and dark beard giving him a bulky dignity as he hunched forward against the icy wind. Yes, he said, he also liked the writings of Carnegie. They were widely available and everyone read them, though less, he conceded, for their ideological insights than for practical psychological tips on how to influence people ("manipulate" was the word he used). He asked me to forgive Abdullah, a more fanatical boy who had poked me in the arm while explaining why it might one day be necessary to conduct a holy war against American infidels. "Abdullah doesn't understand that you'll never convince anyone that way," Nukh said with a smile. "He doesn't know anything about body language."

Nukh's career aim was to be a journalist and businessman; he confided that he had written what he described as an "Islamic romance novel" that he had unsuccessfully offered for publication to a Kazan publishing house. Now, as a token of our meeting, he presented me with a gift: a paperback book, its cover adorned with a mobile phone and a Filofax, entitled *Image: A Practical Handbook for Men and Women*, by an American named Lillian Brown. He autographed it in memory of our meeting. Bemused by this melange of West and East, I asked Nukh whether, by chance, he considered himself to be a Russian. He shook his head: "Before Allah racial and ethnic

differences have no meaning. I am a Muslim before all." And it was on that note that we said good-bye.

Nukh's response poses a fundamental challenge to modern-day Russia: how to maintain the integrity, the unity, the internal coherence—whatever one wants to call it—of the world's biggest country. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has remained an immense conglomerate, a multinational and multi-confessional state of bewildering complexity. Nukh and his classmates are Tatars, thus representing both Russia's second largest ethnic group and, on another level, the 25 percent of citizens of the Russian Federation who are not ethnic Russians. As such they also point to an unresolved tension between two distinct conceptions of "Russia" for which English, unlike the Russian language, has no handy equivalent.

The competition is between *Rossiia*, a primarily territorial entity, legal successor to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, and *Rus'*, the historical homeland of the Russian people, a place that has now become an ethnic, somewhat mythical, perhaps even metaphysical ideal. Nukh and his classmates are *rossiyane*, citizens of the Russian Federation whose ethnicity or religious beliefs have no bearing on the passports they hold, but they are not *russkie*, ethnic Russians who possess the indefinable and disputed passport of "Russianness," that elusive spiritual core that Russians have never quite been able to define entirely to the satisfaction of themselves or others.

At the beginning of this decade Russia seemed to be rising toward a new self-understanding, a renaissance of national identity that defined itself hopefully against the backdrop of an atrophied Soviet Union. It was this rebirth that buoyed Boris Yeltsin, who was both a promoter and a beneficiary of the change, to the apex of his power. Yet today, five years into its existence as an independent state, Russia looks less like a country in any familiar sense of the word than it did when it set out on its journey. Its

natural heterogeneity is looking increasingly like fragmentation. A state exists on two levels: through the consensus of its citizens, through their collective belief in its viability; and by virtue of the central government's ability to hold up the scaffolding of statehood. When a modern central government fails in its most basic obligations (providing a social safety net, guaranteeing basic education and infrastructural investment, implementing mechanisms of internal and external security, ensuring the macroeconomic preconditions of prosperity), its citizens will deny it fealty.

As things stand today the government in Moscow is delinquent on all counts. Dubious statistics cannot conceal that economic decline is continuing apace, and the handful of oligarchs who now control the country's economy show little inclination to reinvest their profits in its future. Government wage and pension arrears have reached catastrophic dimensions, aggravated by the failure to collect taxes and to unlock industrial enterprises from a logjam of mutual indebtedness and collapsing productivity. Government financing of education and public services has degraded to levels at times surreal; some regions talk openly about refusing to pay tax receipts into the federal budget, thus essentially threatening economic secession. The regular army is generally acknowledged to be incapable of fighting anyone; much of its former strength has been siphoned off to the troops of the Interior Ministry (to be used against Russian citizens) and to the proliferating private armies of various members of the government. Meanwhile, a recent study showed that Russians overwhelmingly fear their own corrupt police more than the forces of organized crime.

Such tendencies, which have served for intense discussion among Russian elites, lie behind a bizarre and relatively little-noticed project launched by the Yeltsin administration soon after last summer's presidential elections. It was announced, as if this were the most natural thing in the world, that the government was soliciting proposals for a

new “Russian Idea,” a national ideology around which a fragmented and despairing country could unite. The competition entry to provide the most viable solution to the country’s crisis of self would receive the eternal thanks of the Russian people and a cool cash reward of five million rubles (about \$900 at present exchange rates). Since then, the government working group assigned to assess submissions has gone about its task under conditions of secrecy, as if working on a mysterious miracle weapon designed to make the country invulnerable forever. Meanwhile, though, the official government newspaper, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, quickly took the cue by staging a contest of its own and publishing the best proposals in its pages; soon other papers were following suit.

What was most striking about the proposals for a new “Russian Idea,” though, was their staleness. It seemed that there was nothing new under the sun: the Slavophilic idea of Russia as a special, collectively oriented civilization with a mission to save the world; guidance through the “spiritual” purity of Orthodoxy; even vaguely liberal yearnings for a distinctly Russian democracy cleansed of all those messy conflicts of interest so characteristic of the materialistic West. Naturally the contest also had its critics. Hadn’t Russia, they asked, just completed a catastrophic experiment to impose an ideology from above?

Tula, a provincial capital just a few hours from Moscow by car, is a place for which the word “dispirited” seems profoundly inadequate. Stop passersby on the street and you will meet with one of two emotions: red-hot anger or limitless despair. (One man with a mendicant’s beard and mournful blue eyes removed a loaf of bread from under his coat, saying that he hasn’t been paid in four months. “How am I supposed to feel?” he asked. “This is all I have to feed my kids.”) In Soviet days, the city was a center of the military-industrial complex, but nowadays, as the factories grind to a halt, the slogans sound more mocking than ever: GLORY TO

YOU, TULA, CITY OF WEAPONS-MAKERS! Tula voters recently elected as their new governor a man who once belonged to the conspirators who tried to topple Gorbachev in 1991.

In Tula I found myself at a desk in the editorial office of the leading evening paper. Though I had come to discuss other things, it turned out that the editor had something to get off his chest. He counted himself a member of the generation that came of age with Khrushchev’s abortive reforms in the early 1960s, and had served in the provincial government during Gorbachev’s later experiments. Though the editor clearly considered himself a patriot, someone who “believed” in Russia, from his present perspective he could only see the search for Russianness as a masochistic dead end, an orgy of disillusionment:

I supported the liberals. We wanted to break apart [*perelomit*] that whole idiotic system. We were so happy we pissed on ourselves, if you’ll excuse the expression. Now many of those people are in the opposition.

In 1990 we destroyed the system, the Soviet Union and the CPSU; well, with some help from you Americans, of course. The idea was that we were going to follow you, to take the path of the civilized world. And then, when only three or four years later the West started talking about expanding NATO, every Russian saw that as a betrayal. We’re so low and squalid and exhausted. How could we possibly scare anyone today? We don’t have capitalism. We just have people who steal from the country. The money’s not even capital. It’s just spent in restaurants, on girls, on cars.

But we do admire Americans for working cheerfully, for being everything that Russians aren’t. I admire Americans. While we’re sitting here and philosophizing, an American has already done something. Essentially, we’re a nation of slaves. Nineteen seventeen was a slave revolt. Everything that was built after that was built by slaves.

If we go on fighting about whether we’re Westerners or have to go our own way, it won’t help us at all. We’re at a stage where we

have to get our nation together. All of its life, all of its history, Russia has lived for the troubles of others. Russia historically has this idea that it's trying to take care of its brothers all around the world. Whenever Russia got tangled up somewhere, it always lost a horrible number of people. We went through World War II with the most unbelievable losses, but America earned very well from it. Then we spent everything we had on the atomic bomb. We managed to get tangled up in foreign adventures but got absolutely nothing out of them. I'm still paying for that as a taxpayer. Maybe there's some sort of curse hanging over our country—this idiotic idea of the Russian mission.

Oleg, a Muscovite, had noticeably little to say about politics. We made our acquaintance, rather by chance, at an evening of vaguely avant-garde *performansy* in a Moscow theater. In his early twenties, Oleg had the startling Adam's apple, the slablike cheekbones, and the dark hair and eyes of the young Pasternak. He could be disarmingly ingenuous: "Let's have a conversation," he said a few minutes after we had met. Like Nukh in Kazan, Oleg was intrigued by techniques for "manipulating" people. "Look at the way he uses his gestures to put other people on the defensive," he said, nodding down at an acquaintance from the balustrade where we stood. "Always in control." But Oleg, who was also studying literature at Moscow State University, felt no need to put this knowledge to practical use. What interested him was religion. He explained that he had just finished a week-long monastic retreat at an Orthodox cloister. "What impressed me the most was the lack of passion," he said. "The monks there lived their faith, and that was all they had. Here on the outside we're always passionate, chasing frantically after illusory gains."

His experience had confirmed his interest in the monastic way of life. He wanted to go to Tibet one day and learn how the monks there lived; he dreamed of traveling to Europe and living with Cistercians. It

came as a revelation to him to hear about Thomas Merton, the American poet who had embraced Catholicism and had gone on to become a Trappist. When I described how Merton had gone to Asia to study Buddhism and mystical traditions of the Orient, Oleg reacted with mild consternation. "You mean the Catholic Church actually *supported* him in that?" He shook his head. Then he explained that his Orthodox guides, the priests and monks of his acquaintance, had forbidden him, in no uncertain terms, to seek any paths to enlightenment that led beyond Eastern Christianity. There was a place in Moscow that offered books about Catholicism, he said, and reaching into his pocket he handed me a small calendar with a color reproduction of an icon that advertised something called the "Spiritual Library." "But they told me I was committing a sin if I went."

Such prohibitions seemed of a piece, we agreed, with the Church's recent lobbying efforts. The Orthodox patriarch has pushed the Russian government to restrict the activities of foreign missionaries. Evidently, the competitors have been making significant forays into the ranks of Orthodox believers, and stories such as Oleg's helped to explain why. Before we parted, I couldn't help asking a question which our conversation had skirted around: how would he define Russianness? He thought for a second, then said: "I don't know what Russia is. It's a feeling. I'm not sure I could ever put it into words."

A few years ago, disillusioned with her work as an academic, Katya, in her early forties, took a job in the Ministry of Press and Information. She was there when the *putsch* attempt took place in August 1991. "I was there when the old Soviet officials left and the new ones came in"—the "new ones" being Yeltsin loyalists, the bureaucratic class of the new Russia. Except, says Katya, that there wasn't much that was new about them. They were also former Party people, and it quickly became obvious, she said, "that they hadn't come for long. They were

completely uninterested in the work of the ministry. All they were worried about was how to get the biggest office and the most money and how to position themselves for the next step." Her meager hopes defeated, Katya responded in profoundly Russian fashion: she staged a retreat into the realm of the spirit. She decided to complete an advanced degree devoted to her one real love in life, the works of the painter Vassily Kandinsky. She spoke at length about the mystical impulses, Theosophy, and a more idiosyncratically Russian movement called Cosmism, that had fueled Kandinsky's turn away from the figurative. "It's a very Russian idea," she observed, "that you can only comprehend truth by means of abstraction."

We were sitting in a Mexican restaurant, drinking frozen margaritas—a fashionable innovation in nouveau riche Moscow these days but one unknown to Katya, mainly because, as she said herself, she never went out of the house. When a houseguest showed her a photo she had taken of their building, Katya blinked in surprise: "Wow, I moved there when I was six and now I don't even recognize it."

She made a point of never watching TV, and she tried to avoid the more overtly political parts of the newspapers. But one thing in her reading of the daily press had struck her: "They're always talking about democracy. But we don't have democracy in Russia now, and we probably won't ever. It just doesn't apply. We're just, well, too chaotic, perhaps." It was to support her case that she told me her story of the ministry where nothing had changed, and perhaps she had a point. An even better argument, which she did not make, was the subsequent tale of her own withdrawal, for Russia's political fate today depends as much, if not more, on those who do not act because of inertia and passivity, as it does on implemented plans and measures taken. As we talked about all this, Katya suddenly laughed. "Have you ever heard of this amazing film? I think it says it all best. It's called *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*."

For the first three months of 1997 I conducted my own private and highly unscientific survey of Russian opinions about the search for national identity. Certain themes emerged, but so did certain persistent contradictions. Grandiose ideological plans and "national missions" have lost their appeal; but so, too, have the ambitious promises of Western reformers. When I asked Russians from across the country whether they now live in a democracy, the response was overwhelmingly "no."

Polls show, however, that a majority of Russians favor individual human rights and the values of the market over plans for collective sacrifice in the name of "Russia," and this coincides with my own finding of a deep-seated skepticism, even among non-democrats, about any ideas of a "special Russian mission." The Orthodox Church, though regarded as an important source of cultural identity, is surprisingly often regarded as a barrier to the search for spirituality. At the same time even ostensible Westernizers express deep skepticism of the West, and over and over my respondents insisted that Russia must find its "own way" to coherence and stability. What that meant concretely they were usually unable to say.

These complications in mind, I settled down in front of the VCR one night to watch the film that kept coming up in my conversations with Katya and the others. *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* is an ironic burlesque shot in 1995. A young Finn, possessed by his own beautiful visions of nineteenth-century novels, has come to Russia to experience a "traditional hunt." What he actually encounters is a series of jolting vagaries (a black Russian with a violin case, a cow in the bomb bay of a military plane, a yeti) and an endless drinking binge with several select representatives of the national spirit. The cigar-smoking general who pronounces minimalist toasts in a growling bass is a take-off on Alexander Lebed; the host of the hunt, a good-natured holy fool in a cast-off army greatcoat and fur hat, is a sort of de-fanged Rasputin who meditates

in front of his Zen rock garden or waxes eloquent on the erotic charms of the local elk. ("But I don't want to have sex with the animals!" says the Finn in consternation.) But of course it never comes to that; actually, it never really comes to anything at all.

When the Finn wants to know when they're finally going to get to the task at hand, the answer is always *mañana*. Only gradually does it dawn on him that the hunt is merely a pretext for getting drunk, manic philosophizing, and sudden outbursts of frantic (and invariably ineffectual) activity.

The point of the "national hunt," in fact, is that there is no hunt. The foreigner's efforts to penetrate to an authentically Russian experience are comically hopeless, but the Russians themselves aren't much better off. "Drinking again, are you?" says one of the hunters, looking down on his comrades in disgust. "Looking for salvation? Think it's all over with Russia? Well, take *this*!" And he presents them with an obscene gesture. After a while, of course, he thinks better of it—and sits down to have another drink. Thus does the hunt continue; one can only hope that the pain will pass.

“The legend”

by John Haines

I.

I understand the story of Gilgamesh,
of Enkidu, who called the wind by name,
who drank at the pool of silence,
kneeling in the sunburnt shallows
with all four-footed creatures.

I know the name of that exile,
the form that it takes within us:
the parting and breaking of things,
the distance and anguish.

I know too, in its utter strangeness,
that whoever asks of the sun its rising,
of the night its moonstruck depths,
stirs the envy of God in his lofty cabin.

And when Enkidu awoke, called
from his changed, companionless sleep
—singly, in glittering pairs,
the beasts vanished from the spring.

II.

The forest bond is broken,
and the tongued leaves no longer
speak for the dumb soul lost
in the wilderness of his own flesh.

All that had life for him:
the moon with her wandering children,
the storm-horse and the shepherd-bird,
become as salt to his outspread hand.

Let him go forth, to try the roads,
become that wasted pilgrim, familiar
with dust, dry chirps and whispers;
to die many times—die as a man dies,
seeing death in the life of things.

And then descend, deep into rootland
—not as temple-gardener, planting
with laurel the graves of gods and heroes,
but as one grieving and lost . . .

To ask of the dead, of their fallen
web-faces, the spider's truth,
the rove-beetle's code of conduct.

By such knowledge is he cured,
and lives to face the sun at evening,
marked by the redness of clay,
the whiteness of ash on his body.

III.

By stealth, by the mastery of names,
and one resounding axe-blow
rung on the cedar-post at dawn,
the great, stomping bull of the forest
was slain. Rain only speaks
there now on the pelted leaves.

Overheard through the downpour,
in the stillness of my own
late-learned solace, I understand
through what repeated error
we were driven from Paradise.
The nailed gate and the fiery angel
are true.

Could we ask them,
speaking their wind-language
of cries, of indecipherable song,
it may be that the swallows
who thread the water at evening
could tell us; or that the sparrows
who flock after rain, would write
in the coarse yellow meal
we have strewn at the threshold,
why God gave death to men,
keeping life for himself.

For the strong man driven to question,
and for him who, equally strong,
believes without asking,
sleep follows like a lasting shadow.

1981-96

--*John Haines*

Theater

Stonewall Jackson slept here

by Mark Steyn

The London producer Thelma Holt was in New York a couple of weeks back, to look in on one of her plays but also to bring a briefcase full of postal voting forms in order to cajole the hordes of British actors treading the boards in Manhattan to participate in the UK general election. And on whose behalf was she going to all this trouble? “Who d’you think?” she retorted. “I wouldn’t be lugging the forms halfway round the world in order to get people to vote Tory.”

It’s perfectly reasonable for actors to be left-wing: most of them spend most of their time either unemployed or earning a pittance. At first, it’s not so bad: they have the same kind of seedy bedsits as their old school chums, who are training to be accountants, salesmen, lawyers, store managers. A few years on, the actor still has his seedy bedsit, while his pals have moved on to homes in the suburbs. A few more years pass, he still has the bedsit, while they’re contemplating Mayfair mews houses and Tudor manors. His calling only makes sense as a self-sacrificing socialist commune. Those few who do break out—who become “stars”—feel guilty about it and maintain a bogus solidarity. If you go to the National Theatre to see Ian McKellen in *Richard III*, you find the playbill lists the company alphabetically—not just the actors, but the technical crew, too. McKellen’s the reason you’re there, but you have to plough through a zillion Third Spear Carriers to

find his name. The egalitarianism is just for show: you won’t find McKellen carrying a spear and Joe Schmoe wearing the crown; there’s a reason why one’s the male lead and the other’s in the chorus. But what a weird business it is: on the one hand, they insist they’re creative artists; on the other, they set up working structures modeled on union agreements for Grade II Lathe Operatives. Even if you become a Hollywood superstar with above-the-title billing, these contradictions endure: you go on the Oscars to denounce cuts in NEA funding; you excoriate Newt and then wait for him to suck up to you. No matter that, if every movie star earning over ten million dollars per picture agreed to give three million to the NEA, we could have all the boundary-breaking envelope-pushing art we wanted. Instead, top actors, so keen to deplore the excesses of heartless capitalism, maintain wage differentials that CEOs from the auto industry to the sweatshop exploitation biz can only marvel at. Not surprisingly, real shopfloor workers aren’t taken in by this: in Britain, the Labor Party decided that in the 1992 election they’d gone overboard on the “luvvies”—as Fleet Street calls theatricals—and that voters had been turned off by these preening, self-regarding thespians. “This time,” said one West End actor, “Labor HQ told us, ‘just keep your heads down, darlings.’” I doubt whether that Labor spokesperson actually said “darlings,” but you get the general idea.

So much for actors. Writers surely should know better, yet apparently not. Conservatism is invisible in the theater. A left-wing dramatist—David Hare, say, or Tony Kushner—is a dramatist who writes left-wing drama. A right-wing dramatist is a dramatist who resents paying excessively high rates of income tax. Thus, shortly before every British election, Andrew Lloyd Webber announces that, in the event of a Labor Party victory, he might have to leave the country. Traditionally, this announcement is immediately followed by a 15 percent leap in the polls for Labor. But the point is Lloyd Webber would never dream of arguing his case in his work: his conservatism, like that of his Tory-voting lyricists Don Black and Tim Rice, is strictly a leisure-time activity. Some conservatives argue that that's because conservatism's merits are self-evident: it works so well off-stage, you don't need to discuss it on-. By contrast, socialism only works on-stage; it's a disaster off-. And for guilty middle-class theatergoers the fact that playwrights have left-wing ideals means we don't have to: like making a donation to a Bosnian refugee charity, it absolves us from giving the matter any further thought. But it also means the American play, like the American musical, now operates mainly within very limited conventions: instead of stock characters and stock song ideas, it's stock themes—racism, homophobia, more racism, an exciting breakthrough like racist homophobia, then more racism, more homophobia, maybe some homophobic racism . . .

Most of these plays, especially at regional theaters, are by writers who are not so much dramatists as canny navigators of the artistic grant system. Archer Daniels Midland sets up a fund for New African-American Lesbian Writing, so Victoria's Secret responds with a fund for New Pre-Operative Transsexual Latino Drama and next thing you know the artistic director at Presque Isle's prestigious Stage Two is calling in the head of her Pre-Operative Transsexual Outreach Program and demanding to know where they can find a

Latino who can type. Any real dramatist, whether left-wing or not, who spent ten minutes with today's "arts administrators" would surely find it hard to resist sending the whole business up mercilessly. But no-one has, until now.

The author in question is Jonathan Reynolds. *Stonewall Jackson's House* (at the American Place) opens in Stonewall Jackson's house in Lexington, Virginia. The tour guide is LaWanda, a young black woman in period dress who explains the Confederate general's artifacts: "the rotor of the ruffler implanted the ruffles." The visitors this day are an elderly couple from an Ohio farm and an Alabama bait salesman and his wife: "I'm sterile, she's barren," says Junior; "It ain't easy being white trash," says Mag. But LaWanda has had it hard, too: raised by her sister, she became "an early smoker and crack addict." Deep in debt, tired of her period costume and degrading job, she hits on an ingenious solution: she asks the elderly couple if they'll take her back to their Ohio idyll as their slave. Barney and Del agree, though with reservations: "We're not going to call you 'slave,'" he insists. "We'll call you an 'associate.'"

At this point, Henry Dunn's small set of Stonewall Jackson panels swings away. What we've just seen, it seems, is a run-through for the play, which the author is submitting to a theater company for their next season. The board's arguments about the play-within-the-play form the meat of the real play.

Like most satire, *Stonewall Jackson's House* is all too true. Jonathan Reynolds has been a political strategist for Eugene McCarthy, a gag writer for David Frost, a sidekick to Oliver Stone, a screenwriter for Eddie Murphy, but back in the early Eighties he happened to find himself in Lexington, Virginia, at a loose end and decided to look in on the general's place. There was indeed a young black woman in period costume, and the incongruity struck Reynolds.

So he wrote as play about it—a one-act concluding with LaWanda becoming a

slave—and gave a reading at the Actors' Studio in front of Eric Bentley, Elia Kazan, Norman Mailer, and others. They loathed the play, pronounced it racist, demanded to know what right a white man had to write in the voice of a black woman, etc. All of which Reynolds pondered as he scuttled from the theater.

So he wrote another play about the reaction to the first play. And, after being rejected by every theater in the country, he's finally got it on.

Comedy's fatal weakness is its need to be loved. On Broadway, on TV, in movies, comedy panders: it tells you jokes about things you already find funny. Reynolds disdains that: as his play careers wildly on, it takes swings at race, welfare, feminism, victim culture and, above all, arts orthodoxies. Great comedy often has a screw-you quality about it: the author doesn't care whether you laugh or not, these are the jokes he's going to make. Reynolds is like that: there are no agreed laughs in the play. Instead of binding the audience as one, he divides us up: some laugh at this line, some at that, some are too shocked to laugh, some titter nervously as if they don't want to be caught laughing. And, after years of the stultifying uniformity of American drama, few of us can quite believe we're hearing these words on a New York stage.

Instead of the real-life Bentley and Mailer, Reynolds introduces us to Oz and Gaby, husband and wife, artistic director and leading lady of the theater company; a ball-breaking Englishwoman visiting from her theater in London; Oz's dramaturge, Tracey, who's black; and Joe, the all too white author of *Stonewall Jackson's House*. No one can quite believe what they've seen: a play by a white man which suggests black women would willingly return to slavery. Gaby, who's Jewish, is offended by the play's anti-Semitism. "The one thing this play isn't is anti-Semitic," says Oz.

"It would be if it were about a Jew," she replies.

"Aside from the racism, how did you like it?" asks Oz, who's attracted to it because

it's "provocative." The trouble is, in thrall to their various grants and funds, the company's program is 75 percent "non-traditional—people of color, women, the sexually precarious." The question of a play about non-traditional people of color by a traditional person of non-color has never before arisen. Then Gaby proposes a solution in the casting of the lead role, LaWanda the wannabe slave: "You keep her black, but she's played by a white woman," she decides, believing strongly in non-traditional casting. "Latinos and Latinas should be able to play Iraqis." But this is codespeak: Gaby isn't interested in Iraqi Equity; she wants this part for herself. "I," she says, "am a Jew," as if no further explanation is necessary.

Tracey, as the sole African-American present, maintains that the piece is racist—a charge the young white lunk of an author denies, on the grounds that not only the black tour guide but also the white-trash bait salesman wish to become slaves. But Oz is unpersuaded. The play cannot be produced because it was written by a white man: in such a world, a person of non-color is effectively a non-person. If only it had been written by an African-American . . . And, at that moment, Reynolds unveils his second surprise: the play's author *is* black; it's Tracey, the dramaturge who's been attacking it as racist. Joe is merely an unemployed white actor she's hired.

Reynolds's structure is impressive. It's not clever-clever for its own sake, but it likes keeping you off-balance, shifting your point of view. In Act Two, Tracey emerges as the most radical black seen on an American stage in years, not interested in Jesse Jackson or affirmative action or any of the other flimflam. She resents the way blacks are "indentured to a welfare state. . . . we are now the property of the United States Civil Rights Industry, Inc." Welfare, she says, has enslaved blacks just as thoroughly as slavery, though she concedes that "victimization is always somewhat voluntary. S&M is never referred to as just S."

Oz and Gaby are bewildered. Contemplating retirement, they'd planned to name her as their successor: she'd be "the youngest African-American woman to run a major not-for-profit theater in America." But the way she's talking now . . . "Dear," says Gaby sweetly, "didn't you take any Black Studies in college?"

Oz, meanwhile, is worried. He liked the play because he thought it was "provocative," but he only meant "provocative" in the ineffectual, theatrical sense of the word. "The chief responsibility of the arts," he says, "is not to hurt anyone's feelings." Or, as Gaby cautions, "Audiences don't like controversy unless they agree with it." When Tracey turns her fire on Oz and Gaby for being patronizing West Side paternalists, they're shocked. "After all we've given you . . . taken you on vacation . . ."

Gradually, remorselessly, Reynolds is broadening out the play. Almost in Shavian fashion, every character gets quite a substantial speech about victimization, real or perceived. *It's easy to quote lines from this play, but, as they zing across the footlights, they don't seem like lines, but rather the genuine expression of all too recognizable characters.* Oz admits he doesn't know what racism is anymore: slavery and lynchings? sure, that's racist; segregated buses and lunch counters? absolutely; but the odd cab that won't stop for you? is that *really* racist? and, if it is, given human nature, then America will always be racist . . . But the best speech goes to the snooty Brit, who's bored stiff by the way Americans are constantly talking about race as the greatest "challenge" society faces. What about Arabs and Jews? Hutus and Tutsis? Brahmins and Untouchables? All are incomparably worse than blacks and whites in America, and it's only Americans' monumental self-absorption and their total ignorance of the rest of the world that prevents them realizing such an obvious truth. That speeches of such virtuoso spunkiness should seem so unusual on an off-Broadway stage testifies to the paralysis of American drama. On issues such as race, the theater hasn't opened up the

debate, only closed it down and gated it off from American life. And that English director's right: it isn't as bad as Hutus and Tutsis, and we ought to talk about it more—but honestly.

By the time you read this, *Stonewall Jackson's House* will be in its final month of performances at the American Place, but I hope it finds another home for an open-ended engagement. So I won't reveal the ending, except to say that it involves rewrites and Pulitzerz. Jamie Richards's staging makes for a brisk, efficient production, and he draws five fine performances from his small cast, though I'll remember especially Ron Faber as the befuddled Oz and Katherine Leask as the Englishwoman. You could hail this play as the first politically conservative drama in decades, but even to categorize it as such is limiting: all Reynolds is doing is kicking the subject around in the way all subjects should be kicked around. It's certainly the best play about the American theater in years and someone should organize a gala performance before an invited audience of our dimmer regional arts administrators. Actually, given their numbers, make that a week of gala performances.

A couple of blocks away, at the Brooks Atkinson, it's business as usual. Broadway is supposed to be commercial theater, but, in fact, it's not commercial enough. Truly commercial industries—Burger King, Nike, Body Shop, Disney, Toyota, Victoria's Secret, you name it—are forever coming up with things you never knew you needed: new products mean new business. Broadway is terrified of anything new, even though that's where the big bucks are (*Cats*). So a new Broadway musical is one with old songs, old orchestrations, old dances, old stereotypes—and increasingly bizarre shotgun marriages between its mummified corpses. In *Play On!*, it's Duke Ellington meets Will Shakespeare—that's to say, the plot of *Twelfth Night* relocated to Harlem and decked out with Duke's greatest hits. Shakespeare is beyond the protection of the copyright laws and he'll

have to take his own chances; but Ellington isn't and, if his estate had a care for his reputation, they'd close this travesty down. He'd have loathed this show: the stock racial cutouts dishonor one of the greatest of American composers. Ellington badly wanted a Broadway hit, but never managed it. *Play On!* is not what he had in mind.

In the latter half of his career, incidentally, Ellington wrote quite a bit of Shakespearean music, including the orchestral suite *Such Sweet Thunder*, which is full of solid musical drama. If you object that it wasn't written for a stage musical, well, neither were any of the songs in this show. If you object that it's non-vocal music, well, the same could be said of much of this score: "songs" like "Take the A Train" and "Mood Indigo" are essentially instrumentals to which vocals of varying degrees of competence have been tacked on. But Sheldon Epps, the director and necrophilic matchmaker behind this project, isn't interested in finding the right Ellington music to tell this story—that's too much like hard work; it's easier just to pillage the Greatest Hits album.

It doesn't work. For a start, when everything in a score is a hit, it's like gorging on truffles. But, more importantly, these songs, being pop songs, have little of the forward propulsion needed for musicals. The best example is the most obvious. When Billy Strayhorn arrived in New York, he called Ellington to find out how to get to his place in Harlem. Duke told him, "Take the A train"—and Strayhorn wrote up the directions as a song. An echo of that survives in *Play On!*, as a budding lady songwriter disembarks at Grand Central and asks, "Which way Harlem?" There then follow not one but two production numbers—"Take the A Train" and "Drop Me Off in Harlem"—for the duration of which the show stands absolutely still. It's not taking the A train, it's taking the Exercycle: they huff and puff and peddle furiously, but they're going nowhere. Sheldon Epps had a similar show a decade or so back, *Blues in the Night*. It's about time he let these composers alone and tried writing something himself. *Play On!* will soon be a play off. But Ellington deserves better.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

The future of the European past, X

by Roger Kimball

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Lovis Corinth by Karen Wilkin

Gibbon's "Decline & Fall" by Keith Windschuttle

Verse chronicle by William Logan

New poems by Luke Zilles & Brian Henry

“The Glory of Byzantium” at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

Byzantium! A name that glitters. A synonym for formality, unbending etiquette, luxury, exoticism. A word that stands for unyielding resistance to change, for codified, inflexible forms, for intrigue and bloodthirsty scheming. Say “Byzantium” and you stand before processions of saints and martyrs trapped in shimmering fields of gold and glass tesserae. You conjure up rigid figures who glare fiercely from the confines of icons and manuscripts, their gorgeously colored robes heavy with embroidery and punctuated by overscaled jewels, their gestures ritualized, exaggerated, theatrical. You see Yeats’s “sages standing in God’s holy fire/ as in the gold mosaic of a wall,” their solemn progress and otherworldly setting alike echoed by the thudding reiterations of “gold” and “golden” in the stunning last stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium.”

The reality of what that magic name evokes was, of course, far more complicated. The Byzantine Empire lasted for more than a thousand years. Begun in 324, when the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, moved his capital to the Greek city of Byzantium, renaming it Constantinople—present day Istanbul—in his own honor, it ended only in 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. There were considerable stretches during this extraordinary span when Byzantine influence encompassed much of the known world of the time, reaching westward from Constantinople across the entire Mediter-

anean and eastward toward Central Asia. But throughout the long and convoluted history of Byzantium, internal strife, theological hairsplitting, and competition with the Latin West, along with the added complications of the rise of Islam and the advent of the Crusades, all affected the extent and inner workings of the empire. By the beginning of the ninth century, for example, once vast territory consolidated by the Christian emperors had shrunk to what is today more or less Greece and Turkey. For the previous hundred years, struggles with the Iconoclast faction had played havoc with the stability of the empire. At issue was a serious doctrinal question about the nature of Christ: roughly, how could Christ be said to have suffered like a mortal man if he had a body that could not be delineated?

Happily for art historians, the “iconophiles” won the day. The permanent restoration of the use of icons, celebrated as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” in 843, ushered in the Second Golden Age (there’s that word again) of Byzantine civilization—four hundred years of imperial expansion, power, and the pursuit of elegance. The Metropolitan Museum’s spectacular exhibition, “The Glory of Byzantium,”¹ focuses on this

1 “The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on March 11, 1997, and remains on view through July 6, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by

period of affluence and growth by bringing together an absolutely dazzling assortment of objects, from the imperial to the liturgical to the vernacular, that call the vanished marvels of Byzantium vividly and tantalizingly back to life. The show includes fragments of frescoes, mosaics, and architectural decorations; icons, manuscript pages, and ivories; jewelry, reliquaries, ceramics, textiles, processional crosses, precious book covers—and I've probably left something out. There's enough gold to justify every repetition in Yeats's poem and then some, along with all sorts of other visually arresting materials: carved ivory stained with imperial purple, intricately patterned silks, rough-hewn jewels, tiny pearls, luminous enamels, and translucent slices of agate, not to mention substantial chunks of ornamentally carved stone, detached frescoes, and the odd bit of large-scale mosaic decoration, all pried loose from their architectural settings. If the fragmentary, uprooted mosaics and frescoes, like the teasing bits of architectural decoration, make you long to be in one of those miraculous church interiors in Ravenna or Monreale, the host of intimate objects designed to be enjoyed close up more than reward your attention. Many of these glorious things come from remote or hard to reach places; many of them have never traveled before. It's not only exciting to see them for their own merits, but positively thrilling to see widely dispersed related works reunited.

Most impressive, perhaps, among this abundance of impressive displays, are some of the truly legendary objects of the period, the *Mona Lisas* and *Demoiselles d'Avignons* of Byzantine art: three pale, elegant leaves from *The Joshua Roll* (c. 950, Vatican Library) and a brilliantly polychromed page from *The Paris Psalter* (second half of the tenth century, Bibliothèque Nationale de

France, Paris), arguably the best known of all Byzantine manuscripts, both deservedly celebrated for their fluent drawing, expressively staged narrative, and persuasive classicism of form. The exhibition's delicately carved secular ivories are a textbook selection of the genre, including the luxurious *Veroli Casket* (tenth century, Victoria and Albert Museum), famous for its playful survivals of stories from classical mythology, and the opulent purple-dyed *Casket with Emperors and Hunters* (tenth or eleventh century, Cathédrale de Troyes), with its armored horsemen and swirling vines. The large selection of devotional ivories includes such renowned examples as the *Harbaville Triptych* (mid-eleventh century, Musée du Louvre), tellingly juxtaposed with its equally famous ancestor from the Vatican Library, both notable for their double registers of crisply carved, slender apostles and saints, their elegant rondels, and their solemn enthroned Christ.

Yet exciting as it is to see so many key works of the period, as much—perhaps even more—pleasure and information can be had from the exhibition's wealth of less familiar objects, which include many that are just as engaging, inventive, and beautiful as their stellar counterparts. A group of openwork bases for processional crosses, conceived as stylized buildings, have a powerful architectural presence. A suave processional cross from the Georgian State Art Museum of T'bilisi with applied cast figures of notable expressiveness turns out to be, exceptionally, by an artist whose name and working dates are recorded. The artist, Gabriel Saperli (994–1001), is perhaps the Byzantine equivalent of the Latin West's Gislebertus, the brilliant sculptor who proudly signed the tympanum of the Romanesque Cathedral of Saint-Lazare in Autun. Mind you, you have to pay attention. Many of the works in the show were intended for private contemplation and delectation, their lavish detail and minute elaborations perhaps designed to hold your attention during prolonged devotions. Some miniature declarations of faith were

Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (574 pages, \$45; \$75 paper).

meant to be worn, some to be held and studied as you would a book.

Every nuance of formal possibility is represented in the exhibition, from hyper-refinement and meticulous elaboration to downright barbaric display and overloading. Seemingly timeless objects astonish because of their fidelity to unchanging conventions; others, no less respectful in their adherence to these conventions, stop you because of their freshness and originality. Among the surprises is an enchanting eleventh-century manuscript page with a circle of dancing women dressed in gold-trimmed red and blue robes with long dangling sleeves; it looks like a party in a Byzantine court, but it turns out to be Miriam and the Israelite women celebrating the victory over Pharaoh during the Exodus. A delectable twelfth-century icon from the hoard of prime examples at the Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, depicts the metaphorical ladder of St. John Klimax, a thirty-step program that permitted monks who followed the regimen to ascend to heaven. The aspiring monks struggle up a steeply angled diagonal ladder, manfully ignoring the threats of charming little winged devils who yank the unwary off their rungs; the ones armed with lassos are especially effective. Christ welcomes successful climbers to the celestial sphere, while failures plunge, headfirst, into the abyss. (One unfortunate entering the mouth of hell seems to illustrate that classic Yiddish curse “may you grow like an onion with your feet waving in the air and your head in the filth.”)

That there is enormous consistency among the works at the Met is not surprising. The standardization of forms and types is at the core of Byzantine style, the preservation and promulgation of officially sanctioned imagery at the heart of its aesthetic mission. The principal change in how events and protagonists are depicted in Byzantine art—allowing for the varying constraints of different media—is a gradual shift away from the residue of an idealized classical nat-

uralism toward increasing stylization. But if there is little stylistic evolution over the long period examined by the exhibition, there is nonetheless considerable diversity. Works produced for the imperial court and for important religious centers set standards of elegance, refinement, and accomplishment; equally seductive objects from other sources manage to be rich and crude at the same time—that hackneyed phrase “barbaric splendor” kept coming to mind. Artifacts from the outer reaches of the empire bear witness to the way Byzantine art managed to assimilate a host of regional traditions and outside influences without either losing its own identity or destroying local flavor. The show’s extremely interesting examination of the cross-fertilization between Christian Byzantium and Islam includes a fine illuminated manuscript of Dioskorides’ *De materia medica* (1229, Topkapi Museum, Istanbul). The double frontispiece shows the Greek author, famous as a physician and pharmacologist, being presented with copies of his book, an apparently straightforward image, but one whose peculiarities should nevertheless immediately make you suspect cross-cultural complexities even if you didn’t know that you were looking at a text written by a pagan Greek copied by a Christian scribe for use by a Muslim reader. Dioskorides, enthroned, wearing a generic togalike garment, and crowned with a halo, resembles an evangelist in a Byzantine icon; the presenters of the books, inclining toward him, look like Byzantine angels, but they wear long robes similar to modern Arab *jibbas*. All three of the protagonists wear turbans—even Dioskorides, with his halo. Multiculturalism is obviously not exclusively a postmodern phenomenon.

Some of the exhibited objects are in amazingly pristine condition, while others bear fragile witness to past glories. All, without exception, are sumptuous; it appears that the most potent motivation, throughout the course of Byzantine art, was to embellish, enrich, and decorate, as though sheer elaboration could serve to glorify God in all his manifestations, including his en-

tourage of apostles, saints, martyrs, angels, and the like, and by extension, the emperor, his court, and all his train. "The Glory of Byzantium" is, quite simply, gorgeous—which is not to say that it isn't equally engaging intellectually. In fact, the cumulative effect of such an abundance of formality and elaboration, albeit chastely installed and austere spaced, is almost overpowering—somewhere between being trapped in the richest church treasury in the world and being turned loose in the most lavish of souks. (The souk image dominated at the atypically crowded press preview; amid a buzz of Greek, Russian, and Turkish and clouds of patchouli, bejewelled women, men in impeccable dark suits, and *papas* in cassocks and tall black hats contrasted strangely with the usual mix of not very exotic art critics, journalists, and museum staff.)

It's possible to enjoy the visual feast the show provides without paying attention to the informative labels, but you'd miss a great deal. The texts provide a useful summary of complex issues and events, largely obscure to modern Westerners, but essential to an understanding of the culture from which these amazing objects spring. To consider the long "Second Golden Age" of Byzantine culture means taking into account not only the empire's internal elaborations, but its complicated relationship with both the Latin West and Islam, its unstable, expedient alliances with the Crusaders against Muslim invaders, and more. It means considering, as well, Byzantium's sphere of influence, its connections with newly Christianized neighbors, such as the Slavs, who chose the Byzantine church because they were impressed by the power, wealth, and luxury of Constantine's heirs—and hoped it would rub off. For some of the "satellite" peoples who opted for the Eastern, rather than the Latin model, allying themselves with Byzantium represented a deliberate rejection of other possibilities. For others, such as the Rus', who had no previous connection with the Greco-Roman past and hence no nostalgia for an increas-

ingly remote period of glory and high culture, choosing to ally themselves with Byzantium must have been purely an embrace of the most current, promising, and desirable fashion. (I am not sure whether this is the medieval equivalent of a cargo cult or of modern-day America's dissemination of Big Macs, Coca-Cola, and overdesigned running shoes, although the effect of Byzantine cultural colonialism was noticeably more impressive than the effect of proliferating McDonald's franchises.)

The exhibition raises absorbing questions about influence, cross-fertilization, and exchange of information. The relationship of Byzantine art to Western medieval art is obviously a major issue, one that involves intricate connections that have kept art historians busy for decades. Obviously, there are moments of contact that can be documented, periods when religious leaders or the members of the imperial court were more open to the ideas of the West than at other times, or when particular objects were exchanged, usually with noticeable repercussions. The history of medieval art and iconography is closely bound up with the history of significant (or even not so significant) objects that reached the Latin West from Byzantium, sometimes as formal gifts given by the aristocracy or the church and monastic hierarchy, sometimes more informally, as Crusaders' spoils. But there are subtle affinities, less easily explained by specific contacts, that become increasingly evident the longer you look at images with unequivocally Byzantine origins.

Part of the fascination of the objects in "The Glory of Byzantium" is their simultaneous familiarity and exoticism. It's not simply that Byzantine iconography and typology—the traditional codified imagery of icons—survive almost intact to the present, as living elements of the Eastern church, but that echoes of those types inform much of Western Romanesque and Gothic art, and continue to sound well into the Renaissance. Duccio's stories of the Passion and Cimbuë's powerful Madonnas

announce both their debt to canonic traditions of the past and their discovery of new sources of imagery in the familiar and the observable. Even Giotto's startlingly physical stagings of scenes from the life of Christ derive part of their potency from their transformation of familiar Byzantine prototypes.

The catalogue of "The Glory of Byzantium" addresses all of these questions and more in essays on Byzantine society and civilization, images of the court, secular architecture, ceramics and everyday objects, Byzantium and Islam, and Byzantine art and the Latin West—among other things. Generally, the texts are informative and readable, and the illustrations, while sometimes smaller than you might wish, not only provide vivid reminders of the show's riches, but document buildings, frescoes, mosaics, and other treasures that were, of necessity, not included. There are occasional passages that only a specialist could love, such as this, from the essay on Kievan Rus': "The first extant dated nonliturgical Rus' manuscript, the *Sviatoslava* of 1073, made for Prince Iaroslav's son Prince Sviatoslav, is a Rus' copy of a Greek florilegium based on a Bulgarian intermediary text." And there are a few perfectly baffling entries that resist logical analysis. Could someone please explain how, if the crusader image *Madonna and Child on a Curved Throne* (Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington) is dated circa 1290, "further light may eventually be shed on this panel . . . by the continuing study of its possible impact on the work of later artists ranging from the paintings of Duccio in 1285 to icons dating into the 16th century"? (Italics mine.)

The catalogue does demonstrate an effort to be intelligible, despite the intricacies of

the material under discussion. A glossary of some of the more daunting terms is thoughtfully included, although many highly specialized references are defined only within the body of the catalogue text. What makes this difficult is that arcane terms are often deployed without explanation, as if they were commonplace or had already been defined, when, in fact, no definition appears until long after the initial usage, in a subsequent entry. Obviously, this is an editing decision—or more probably, the lack of one—but it can be irritating, since many terms are abstruse no matter how solid your grounding in medieval art. I imagine most of us will have to look up *akakia*—"a purple silk purse carried by the emperor on ceremonial occasions"—or *protovestiaros* (even if you can work out the root words, which literally mean "first keeper of the wardrobe"), since, the glossary tells us, while the term was "originally a high post for a palace eunuch; the title lost its association with the emperor's wardrobe and was conferred on many nobles and high-ranking dignitaries."

Perhaps the most delightful thing about the catalogue is its cover—both front and back. An inspired designer decided to reproduce, virtually actual size, both sides of a spectacular silver gilt book cover studded with jewels, cloisonné enamel plaques, and pearls, made in the late tenth or early eleventh century in Constantinople, and now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, where it probably arrived as crusader booty. No text mars the image of this stunning object (the title and credits are confined to the spine) so the scholarly catalogue documenting "The Glory of Byzantium" masquerades as a Byzantine gospel book. For once, the exhibition catalogue as coffee-table book seems like a good idea.

A daughter of Dada: Hannah Höch at MOMA

by Mario Naves

There is a gratifying modesty in how “The Photomontages of Hannah Höch”¹ at the Museum of Modern Art has been properly, if not perfectly, scaled to its subject. Hannah Höch (1889–1978) was the sole woman artist associated with Berlin Dada, a group known for its strident politics and anti-art stance. In contrast to renowned Dadaists such as George Grosz and John Heartfield, Höch has been, until recently, a modernist footnote. At the time of her death in 1978, she was remembered as the “Bobhaired Muse of the Men’s Club” and, most infamously, the “good girl” of Dada, a moniker given to her by the artist Hans Richter. The exhibition at MOMA attempts to correct this dubious recognition by spotlighting the work for which she is best known, and though the hundred or so photomontages on view are as small in scope as they are in size, they are not negligible. While “The Photomontages of Hannah Höch” does not reveal a major talent, it does show us why

Höch is an artist worth considering in the first place.

This is, of course, seeing the glass half full rather than half empty. Yet at a time when marginal artists are hyped with claims that have little to do with art, “The Photomontages of Hannah Höch” is, as an exhibition of pictures, the equivalent of straight talk. Indeed, the curators’ focus—which, by its very nature, excludes Höch’s paintings, drawings and watercolors—involves something resembling connoisseurship. Admittedly, the resuscitation of Höch’s career owes much to feminist art history, and the catalogue underscores (in the jargonistic parlance of the times) her “poignant commentaries on the strains and confusions caused by culturally exacted gender performances.” One doesn’t have to be an ideologue to find the “good girl” tag belittling, but politics is never a good reason for salvaging (or judging) art. If a few reputable artists have been rescued from oblivion because of their race, gender, or what have you, then we are less blessed than lucky. So it is with Hannah Höch.

Just how much the revitalization of Höch’s reputation is due to extra-aesthetic matters can be divined from the attention bestowed upon the large collage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919–20). With its snipped and jumbled photos of politicians, artists and entertainers, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is a bona

¹ “The Photomontages of Hannah Höch” opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on February 27, 1997, and remains on view through May 20. The exhibition was first seen at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (October 20, 1996–February 2, 1997) and, after closing in New York, it will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 26–September 14, 1997). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Maria Makela, Peter Boswell, and Carolyn Lanchner, has been published by the Walker Art Center (224 pages, \$55; \$35 paper).

fide artifact of the Dadaist epoch. The title alone is fraught with enough symbolism to launch a dozen thesis papers. (*Cut with the Kitchen Knife* did, in fact, serve as the title of a recent study of the photomontages.) In her catalogue essay, Maria Makela pinpoints the work's imagery—from Marx and Lenin to Pola Negri and Kathe Kollwitz to a map of Europe that identifies the countries in which women were able to vote—and makes a kind of sense of it, though scant attention is paid to it as a work of art. And, as such, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is a mess. Physically, it has not held up well; the piece's discolored and mottled surfaces suggest a work that once had graphic power. As it is, Höch's composition—or, should one say, non-composition—is diffuse. Portions of it are funny, but they don't coalesce into anything consequential; it lacks the basic armature a good joke requires. What seems a jolting piece of propaganda is, finally, a dissipated rebus. The appeal of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* to contemporary taste may be precisely this fragmentary quality. There are, it would seem, few things more validating for a confused culture than a confused work of art.

Cut with the Kitchen Knife is the largest and most overtly political of Höch's photomontages. Yet both its scale and "content" were alien to her sensibility. Most of the collages are small—"intimate" is not an inappropriate word—and without the vitriol typical of Berlin Dada. A German critic described the photomontages as being "skeptical in an almost tender way" and this seems about right. For Höch never took great interest in expounding an anti-art agenda. "A clear aesthetically resolved statement" (as the artist had it) was important to Höch. It is noteworthy that not until 1929, almost ten years after the First International Dada Fair, did she feel confident in exhibiting her photomontages publicly. During this time Höch was not completely convinced of photomontage's viability as an art form and exhibited, albeit sporadically, only her paintings and textile designs. None-

theless she found within its "traditionless" parameters an artistic and imaginative freedom absent from her other work.

Although the philosophy of Dada didn't altogether jibe with Höch's world view, the movement itself was an essential catalyst for her art. She clearly benefited, artistically if not emotionally, from being in proximity to the "men's club." Höch's vision, however, was not fueled by anger or despair. What emerges from the photomontages is a sly and not ungentle intellect with a deft eye for design and a love for absurdist disjunction. She was a quirky miniaturist at the beginning of what seemed, at the time, an impossibly big century. The century turned out to be bigger (and more impossible) than anyone in 1920 could have predicted, and if some of Höch's collages seem dated it isn't due to yellowing newsprint alone; the fractured juxtapositions of scale, image, and text in the photomontages have long been a part of our cultural life. The artist (and Höch's one-time lover) Raoul Hausmann, writing in 1931, griped that photomontage was rapidly being shanghaied by commercial and political interests. In this respect, he was prophetic—more than he could ever imagine, in fact. If the edge in Höch's work has dulled a bit, her portrayal of the new century—dizzying and open to possibility and paradox—is often still exhilarating. It is impossible, for instance, not to read the rush of overlapping images in *The Beautiful Girl* (1919–20) or *Untitled* (1921), with its glamour girl spinning atop a turntable, as anything but paeans, albeit acerbic ones, to a world in flux.

Höch's works of the early 1920s are impeccably constructed and the best of them is *High Finance* (1923). Here we are presented with a surfeit of images: an aerial photograph of the Ausstellungsgelände and Jahrhunderthalle in Breslau; British chemist Sir John Herschel; machine parts; a truck riding over a tire clipped, one imagines, from an advertisement; the red-white-and-black striped flag of the empire; and a double-barreled shotgun. With its provocative scraps of imagery, *High Finance* can be

read as a satirical comment on industrialism and power. Yet what makes the collage truly memorable is, for example, how the graphic slickness of the oversized rifle offsets and dominates the grainy photographs of the piece's two main figures or how the ball bearing at the bottom left corner serves as the collage's anchor. Höch snaps her units of information into place and the results positively hum. (The dead-on stability and rhythmic counterpoints of the composition would have impressed Mondrian.) *High Finance* is neither novelty nor propaganda; it is an expertly executed work of art and Höch's masterpiece.

High Finance, *The Beautiful Girl*, and *The Coquette I* (1923–25), a sardonic depiction of courting that has the delicacy of a Persian miniature, all have Dadaist overtones. But the movement, such as it was, petered out in the early 1920s. Höch drifted away from her Dada contacts but not from the avant-garde. Friendships with Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Kurt Schwitters, Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, and Hans and Sophie Tauber Arp provided Höch with an artistic community more conducive to her temperament. "Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters . . ." said Höch in a 1959 interview, "were rare examples of the kind of artist who can really treat a woman as a colleague." (The Dadaists, more often than not, condescended to her.) Yet, the strongest influence—if that is, indeed, what we can call it—on Höch's post-Dadaist work may have been National Socialism. The Nazi rise to power, and its concomitant antagonism toward "degenerate art," were felt early on by Höch: a planned 1932 retrospective of her photomontages at the Dessau Bauhaus was canceled when the local wing of the party closed down the school. In 1939 Höch, keenly aware of the threat to "cultural bolshevists," moved to Heiligensee, a suburb of Berlin, where she lived and worked in relative isolation until the end of the war.

It is little wonder, then, that Höch's work of the 1930s and 1940s becomes increasingly private and prone to Surrealist reverie. These works are problematic in that Höch's

chopped up and rearranged figures had already become routine, rarely rising above the limits of a good formula. (There are, perhaps, one too many mismatched sets of eyeballs here.) While the work of this time is not as tight as the Dada-inspired collages, cumulatively, it makes Höch's pressurized world felt. There are numerous moments of arresting weirdness—the floating, disembodied legs of *Never Keep Both Feet on the Ground* (1940), for example, approach the magical. The best of this group, *The Accident* (1936), however, is atypical. While it uses recognizable motifs—wagon wheels, baskets, and polka dot fabric—*The Accident* is, essentially, an abstraction. Its clunking, circular rhythms create the pictorial equivalent of a perpetual motion machine. Höch would work abstractly again, primarily during the 1950s, but she never equaled the off-kilter beauty of *The Accident*.

The mistake the curators make is in trying to revamp Höch as a contemporary artist. It is surprising to learn that an artist associated with the Weimar Republic was also a contemporary of Robert Rauschenberg, and one sympathizes with Höch when, in 1976, she wearily states: "I'm sick and tired of Dada." Many artists are unfairly stuck in historical brackets that limit our appreciation of their life's work, but Höch is, well, fairly stuck. The most unsettling aspect of her postwar collages isn't necessarily that they are bad. On the contrary, works like *Synthetic Flowers (Propeller Thistles)* (1952) and *Burst Unity* (1955) are accomplished, handsome, and utterly bland. Whether abstract or pseudo-Pop satires, the late photomontages are without bite or artistic necessity. Höch may well have flourished best in an artistic and historical context that made demands of her gifts. At a time when the heritage of Dada was being mainstreamed—courtesy of Rauschenberg, Pop, et al.—Höch was, at best, coasting. It is sad that the most "memorable" work here is also the most embarrassing, simply because it breaks out of the final gallery's monotony. *Homage to Riza Abasi* (1963)—which jux-

taposes the head of an Audrey Hepburn look-alike with the ample body of a belly dancer—is so simple-minded it would make a sophomore art student blush. It isn't Dada-inspired so much as it is Dada-lite. Surely, the exhibition would have been better if it had ended with *Dove of Peace* (1945), a scary and incredulous take on world events, but such are curatorial prerogatives. Instead, we get a finale that is beside the point.

Despite the anticlimactic nature of the final gallery, "The Photomontages of Hannah Höch" is a welcome exhibition. If Höch's work doesn't elicit the intense pleasure we associate with the greatest art, its unassuming pleasures should not be dismissed. "Höch-watchers," including the cat-

alogue essayists, may use terms like "genius" and "dazzling" in describing the work, but these words are too strong for what is, in the end, a pretty good artist in a pretty good exhibition. Such a statement may be interpreted, in some quarters, as the merest chauvinism. Yet it is entirely possible to be a feminist and deplore the politicization of art. Privileging ideological intention over aesthetic fact results in little more than political placebos and diminished art—results, I daresay, Höch herself would have found questionable. Hannah Höch's contribution to twentieth-century art is modest and solid. The crowds I attended the exhibition with seemed to be having a good time. We should take our cue from them and leave the proselytizers to fend for themselves.

Dance

Misha: impossible

by Laura Jacobs

The picture that sized up Mikhail Baryshnikov for his new audience in the West was an Avedon shot that ran in *Vogue* in October 1974, four months after the dancer defected. He flew straight up from the page, arms outstretched, chest bare, sky behind him—huge. He flew out of the lap of *Vogue* and into light. The move could have been the trick of a diver or a gymnast, but the body was pure ballet—that immaculate musculature, the privilege in space, those toes. Baryshnikov had chubby cheeks, which was a shock, and big, round, sad, silent-movie eyes, a blue that sighed the word “persecution.” And it turned out he was small, about five feet six inches. So his round cheeks and round muscles and round-as-a-compass pirouettes and *tours en l’air* made him seem cherubic, a kind of opulent ballet angel. We knew he came from the Kirov, but with his blazing perfection he could just as easily have dropped from the sky, son of the sun. I remember tearing that photo out of *Vogue* and tacking it to the butter-yellow wall of my college dorm room.

The word Apollonian was soon tacked to Baryshnikov. In Gennady Smakov’s book *The Great Russian Dancers*, you find him in the chapter titled “Dancers Without Category,” an honor he shares with Vaslav Nijinsky and Rudolph Nureyev. All three came from the Kirov, all three popped the world’s perception of the male dancer. But the first two were hotbloods who inspired writers to enraptured animal metaphors—

big cats, gold slaves, jungle lust. As exotically and marketably Russian as Baryshnikov was, he did not channel Dionysus. He was more like the love child of pantherine, dance-or-die Nureyev and icecap cool, super-correct Erik Bruhn, dance gods of the Sixties who had a romantic fascination with each other’s techniques (and a very brief fling). Misha was intense and aloof, charismatic and mega-correct, hot *and* cold. Though he was never dance-or-die like Rudi, when Baryshnikov was “into” his work, it was all systems go, classical dancing on a par with Vladimir Nabokov on a literary riff: plush, precise, the pedant in a paradise of plosives. It was articulation pressing the boundaries of the language, self-consciousness at critical mass (eternity just beyond the sound barrier). Misha was a man not a panther. That was the turn-on. His sensuality lay in his phenomenal, formal purity. He was objectivity imploding, conservatism climaxing. Which is why he made such a match with choreographer Twyla Tharp (one of those feminists who only really respects men)—they played mind games with the classical syntax.

In his dancing with American Ballet Theatre, Baryshnikov was always physically rapt, but over time his heart was missing. His Albrecht in *Giselle* became more false not less, as if Misha couldn’t believe in the ballet anymore. The boil of his *brisés* in Act Two, a diagonal that always stunned the audience, well, they boiled harder, as if to

heat up the performance. Eventually, Baryshnikov stopped dancing the prince roles. And that ravishing fifth position of his—legs crossed in an airtight X, thighs and calves having the tempered curves of Brancusi's *Bird in Space*—actually seemed less ballet's Middle C, its intimation of infinity, than a place closed in, alone, a confessional molded to his use. It's funny, I can drum up memories of Baryshnikov dancing, but what floats up on its own is his face. I remember him looking out from his classical technique as if trapped in it.

Baryshnikov left ballet when he left his post as artistic director of ABT in 1989. He'd had it with the board, the development department, the whole arts marketing circus. And he'd had it with the New York critics, who poo-pooed his expensive production of *Swan Lake*, and questioned his leadership of the company in ways they'd never questioned his dancing. American Ballet Theatre lost an imperfect, inspiring director and has been improvising ever since. And Baryshnikov? He defected again, this time quietly. In 1990, with Mark Morris, he founded a small modern dance company called the White Oak Dance Project.

But can he be a modern dancer? Last fall Baryshnikov made a guest appearance with the Tricia Brown Company at BAM's Next Wave Festival. Together, they danced her solo "If You Couldn't See Me." It was a startling embodiment of the old adage: "You can take the boy out of fifth position but you can't take fifth position out of the boy." There was Brown, in her pigeon-toed, plain-Jane, haywire style—indecision in action—and there was Baryshnikov, doing the same steps at the same time ten feet away, making them look like commandments cut in travertine, neat, deep, decisive. The antithesis of the Brown style, he pulled the eye away from Brown and made the dance *his* solo (she became periphery). Such favoritism wasn't supposed to happen, of course, but you can't blame the brain waves for seeking order.

He does look different these days. A pic-

ture of Baryshnikov by Fergus Greer ran in *The New Yorker* a week before White Oak's BAM engagement.¹ The face that used to be so round is now lean, that used to be all cheek is now all forehead (the Luke Skywalker hair has been shorn). Baryshnikov's expression is stern, even severe, gravity pulling at his chin. And the shot itself puts him in a tight frame in which he doesn't fully fit and yet attempts to do a dance (actually, an awkward, right-angle hand position from Merce Cunningham's "Septet"). This photo sums up Baryshnikov's situation in the White Oak Dance Project. That ballet space and sky is long gone.

The name "White Oak" comes from a Florida-Georgia plantation owned by the Gilman Paper Company, whose chairman, Howard Gilman, has put money into the company and given it a place to work. The words White Oak also propose a kind of parallel stature: Baryshnikov has left the pillars of classicism for the equally wise and pure Earth Mother oaks of modern dance. Nevertheless, it's not a particularly coherent or categorical bunch of dances he's put together and there seems to be no curatorial basis for what's included. Rather, White Oak reads like a personal collection of totems and taboos, a repertory that revolves around Baryshnikov, what he thinks he should try, and what he doesn't want to do again (i.e., anything he did before). He's cultivating a garden of think pieces and abstinence—or to put it another way, there's too much forehead and not enough cheek.

It's been a long time since I've seen such a dour assemblage of dances. Both programs contained the late Erick Hawkins's last dance, "Journey of a Poet," a work made in 1994 as a solo for Baryshnikov, and expanded posthumously into an ensemble. Set to a swarming string quartet, Hawkins's creepy-crawly *plastique moderne* makes "Poet" seem a crawl through Kafka, an

¹ The White Oak Dance Project performed two programs comprising four dances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music from March 25, 1997, through March 29.

abstraction or refraction of Baryshnikov's late Eighties Broadway performance as the cockroach in *Metamorphosis*. "Poet" is baloney, and also cause for concern. Doesn't Baryshnikov know how bad it is? And just because he commissioned the dance does that mean we have to see it three years later?

Both programs also featured the engagement's premiere, "Remote," a long and punishingly austere ensemble work by young choreographer Meg Stuart (with equally punishing string music by Eleanor Hovda). Warning bells went off when I read André Lepecki's program note, a two-hundred-word tone poem that began by quoting T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world" and went on to describe "Remote" as "a dance moving around the limits of dancing. Reversing time, cutting time, expanding it to its annihilation, etc." Luckily I had read *The New York Times* the previous Sunday, wherein Stuart explained that she was actually deconstructing a pirouette. And so "Remote" begins with dancers spaced out (both meanings), inching around in glacial slow motion, belaboring the head snap of a ballet "spot," succumbing to *Le Sacre* spasms, starting over and over again. Time expands.

As for annihilation—grainy, gray projections of lost highways, barbed wire, empty windows, and blurred crowds hit the cyclorama in narrow shafts, like St. Sebastian arrows in the social skin. That pirouette, if you hadn't already guessed, is symbolic. Pirouettes, like man, are self-involved and solipsistic, isolated and alienating. Pretty soon the pirouettes look not deconstructed so much as detonated. It's a stage full of victims, everybody tripping and lurching, blown up and homeless. Two dancers try to Only Connect. Only they can't. Baryshnikov does a pretty good imitation of a bag man who's needling the audience and nodding off. The dance ends with Jamie Bish-ton in a cone of dust motes, convulsed.

That Stuart sustains the first half of "Remote," the pirouette part, with such tonal security is an accomplishment. The dance is also slickly performed. But Stuart's heavy,



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high school message is clichéd and dated. And on the evidence of “Remote,” her choreographic hand is *echt* Eighties, her sense of the body in space derivative, a meeting between Twyla Tharp’s violent off-centeredness and Anna Teresa de Keersmacker’s repeating-decimal expressionism. I’m not surprised that most of Stuart’s work has been commissioned and performed in Europe. They eat urban angst for breakfast.

The two swing dances on the programs offered respite, though they too were lit low and dusty. Merce Cunningham’s “Septet” is an early charmer, one of the last dances in which he choreographed hand in hand with the music, Satie’s “Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear” (piano for four hands). Cunningham not only teases his title—the dance requires six dancers (*Les Six*?)—he teases the Twenties of Satie and St. Denis, posing his dancers in archly arty “modern dance” tableaux, framing them in air quotes, in Satie’s moments of studied stillness. With Baryshnikov at its center, you feel Marcel Marceau in the air, too, for Misha plays happily with Cunningham’s mimelike emphasis. It’s perhaps more than Cunningham would wish for, but endearing all the same.

“Unspoken Territory,” a 1995 solo by Dana Reitz for Baryshnikov, was the blessing of the engagement. It is performed in silence, with Baryshnikov costumed in a chiton, apricot-shaded and sheer—he seems a Grecian ghost. And in fact he begins the piece in relief, as if he’d danced right off the surface of an urn, the power of his profile still acting upon him. It is a stream-of-consciousness solo, a passage of unheard melodies. Jennifer Tipton’s lighting is a succession of half-lit geometries—pyramids and trapezoids—beamed down from the fly space, pitched in from the wings, widening and narrowing. Baryshnikov travels along rims of light, bobs in jars of shadow, strikes majestic poses in silhouette. He turns himself to stone, a centurian’s horse, wakes suddenly to his own image and fingers his face like Narcissus. Free association gives way to refrain. In a repeating sequence of

two steps, a leap, and a landing, the rhythm of his feet on the floor is so powerfully certain that the sounds—scuff, scuff, silence, and a plumph—come to seem code for the secret self. That airborne absence is the closest Baryshnikov comes to touching his soul in this repertory.

Unfortunately, “Unspoken Territory” doesn’t compensate for the pleasureless, lusterless whole, the lack of kinetic kick. It’s hard not to feel there’s something punitive in this Project, hard not to hear Baryshnikov saying something like: you didn’t appreciate me at ABT, didn’t see how serious I really was. I may be reading this in, and it may be unfair. But at the very least, White Oak shows his taskmaster’s taste for the dogmatic and the cold—how he takes seriousness way too seriously. Why such dark tones and gloomy lighting? Why must string quartets sound like crazed cicadas or Soviet experiments? Why no joy, and so few jumps? Baryshnikov’s solos are so *à terre* you’d think he ordered the air off-limits. And yet in the instances when he performed a *jeté* (in “Septet”) or a series of turning leaps (the Hawkins) you felt a sigh go through the audience . . . *it’s him, he’s dancing.*

Who is Baryshnikov in this company? Large and lordly on the ballet stage—and make no mistake, even standing still little Misha flooded the Metropolitan Opera House with his presence—Baryshnikov’s chief challenge here is to blend in, stay small. In the sense that the stylistic requirements of these dances scale him down, make him human, he does blend. He dances with modesty and commitment and splendid articulation. But without classicism there’s no critical mass, and without mass there’s no Misha. It’s tempting to view Baryshnikov, in his self-imposed downsizing, as a statement on the diminished state of ballet. I suspect he wouldn’t fight that interpretation. But I don’t think it’s that simple. Baryshnikov has always had a withholding side. He used to give his audiences wonder upon wonder. Now he wants to make us work.

The media

Religion or the merely kooky?

by James Bowman

In Britain, the popular tabloid press, for all its faults, is recognizably a part of the press *tout court*. In America, apart from a few big-city papers which are far less popular and, in fact, mostly struggling to survive, the tabloid press is sold in supermarket checkout lines and is beyond the journalistic pale. Yet one also finds in America, often in the supermarket racks next to *The Globe* and *The National Enquirer*, what amounts to tabloids for middle-brows—tabloids whose credentials as bona fide journalism remain unquestioned. America, after all, pioneered the concept of half-educating a majority of its people instead of properly educating a tiny minority, as most of the rest of the world still does, so there is a very large market here (about the same size as that for the tabloids in Britain, in fact) for *Time* and *Newsweek* and *U.S. News*—publications written by and for would-be intellectuals.

The corrupting influence of the news-magazines on the rest of journalism also bears comparison with that of the tabloids in Britain. This is especially obvious when one of those stories that seem tailor-made for the newsweeklies comes along. The O.J. Simpson trial was such a story, because it gave the clerisy an excuse for endless discussions about race, class, sex, and celebrity in America. In fact, it could be said that the way was prepared for the jury's verdict in Mr. Simpson's criminal trial by over a year's worth of schlock journalism devoted to the proposition that the case was about any-

thing but a violent man who killed his ex-wife and another man in a fit of jealousy. In this misguided but very profitable effort, of course, the newsweeklies were joined by the rest of the media, but it was the newsweeklies who taught the rest of the media the trick of how to do it.

Another example of a story which was to the newsweeklies what "Headless Body in Topless Bar" is to the tabloids was that of the cult suicides in California last month. Now if a poor lunatic somewhere in an asylum or a homeless shelter, or perhaps in an African village or the streets of Calcutta, were to take a fancy that there are super-intelligent extraterrestrial humanoids living among the stars who not only know him personally but find him to be more worthy of their attention and esteem than his dull-witted fellow earthlings do; and if, accordingly, he invented a private religion by which he imagined these creatures would be pleased; and if, finally, he committed suicide in order to be with them, what would be the news value of his story? Even the newsweeklies would be hard put to it to find in it meat for them to chew over. But multiply the lone lunatic by thirty-nine, give them a "leader" and a Web page and put the lot down in posh Rancho Santa Fe and it became a story that dominated the front pages for days and went on reverberating for weeks.

But nowhere did it reverberate more loudly than at *Time*, which gave it a characteristically lurid treatment. On many a mat-

ter of even lesser import, *Time* habitually succumbs to the temptation of portentousness, so it was hardly surprising that in its account of the Rancho Santa Fe deaths the millenarian note was struck like a gong. "Students of the millennium and historians of the bizarre have long been predicting such a catastrophic event in the twilight years of the 20th century, duly noting the rise in the number of obscure cults and the increasingly fevered pitch of their rantings," wrote Elizabeth Gleick. But if there are fevered rantings going on, she offers no examples. The Applewhite cult, on the showing of Ms. Gleick and her "experts," were scarcely to be distinguished from Presbyterians:

James Tabor, who teaches religion at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and was involved in the last desperate attempts to communicate with David Koresh by radio broadcast, says, "This group is completely different. These people rather calmly followed suicide as their exit, in a very positive way, to a higher level of existence. They define death not as the enemy of life but as life itself." United Methodist minister J. Gordon Melton, editor of the authoritative *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, agrees. "In this case they had positive motive, a great place to go to," he says. "So why hang around here?"

It is not altogether clear whether or not Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played Lieutenant Uhura on "Star Trek," counts as an expert or not, but she did have a brother among the cultists and is quoted as saying that he "made his choices, and we respect those choices." It is true that, at the end of her article, Ms. Gleick offers a dissenting view from Janja Lalich, whom she describes as "a cult expert who has been monitoring Heaven's Gate since 1994" and who is quoted as saying that "I don't consider it suicide. I consider it murder" since the cultists were mere "pawns" in the "personal fantasy" of their leader (odd, by the way, that he should be having chess fantasies), but Ms. Gleick's own last word notes that

"Marshall Herff Applewhite has died with his followers. And they seemed so happy to have gone with him. The evidence, such as it is, is on tape."

On a following page, Richard Corliss cranked up the rhetoric by another notch or two and tied the suicides to the central event in the journalistic view of recent history.

Certitude was once the American religion, but after Watergate and other scams, we realized that what we thought was certitude was only blind faith. At least, we think we realized that. Or maybe . . .

In two ways, Americans are suffering a crisis of faith. Some people have lost their faith, so they dip into sleaze news, snickering as they scan the more imaginative tabloids. Others have replaced belief in God or government by faith in more eccentric notions; they look to the stars, to *Star Trek* . . .

O.K., here's our scoop: the real conspiracy is the mind-clouding cocktail of pop culture and hard news. The former has infiltrated and seized control of the latter. Trash is fact, and facts are trash . . . Could the Heaven's Gates distinguish pop fable from cold truth? Can we? . . . Only 39 people chose to rev the once-upon-a-mind of sci-fi into revelation; only 39 took their jumble of theological and televisionary lore to beds from which they never awoke. At least, we *think* they didn't hitch a ride on that UFO. Unless . . . maybe . . .

Oh no! It's even more serious than we thought! The real American "crisis of faith" appears to be that Richard Corliss fears he may be losing his own grip on reality. And where will that leave us?

Although Corliss may win, against stiff competition, the title of most self-regarding among *Time's* *lumpen* stylists, the inimitable Richard Lacayo remains unchallenged as champion of portentousness:

These are the waning years of the 20th century, and out on the margins of spiritual life there's a strange phosphorescence. . . . Part

Christian, part Asian mystic, part Gnostic, part *X-Files*, it mixes immemorial longings with the latest in trivial sentiments. When it all dissolves in overheated computer chat and harmless New Age vaporings, who cares? But sometimes it matters, for both the faithful and the people who care about them. Sometimes it makes death a consummation devoutly, all too devoutly to be desired.

Not bad, you might think, as an attempt to dignify a bunch of delusionally suicidal Trekkies. But Lacayo has hardly even begun. By the time he reaches his peroration he is in full rhetorical flight:

In Gustave Flaubert's story *A Simple Heart*, an old French woman pines for a beloved nephew, a sailor who has disappeared in Cuba. Later she acquires a parrot. Because it comes from the Americas, it reminds her of him. When the parrot dies, she has it stuffed and set in her room among her items of religious veneration. On her deathbed, she has a vision of heaven. The clouds part to reveal an enormous parrot.

The lessons there for Heaven's Gate? The religious impulse sometimes thrives on false sentiment, emotional need and cultural fluff. In its search for meaning, the mind is apt to go down some wrong paths and to mistake its own reflection for the face of God.

And so on. Lacayo toils away mightily at his mangled versions of Shakespeare and Flaubert only to produce this banality. The irony is that it is hard to imagine a better example of "cultural fluff" than this is.

I have not the space to do a tour through the other newsweeklies. Undoubtedly *Time* is the best—which is to say the worst—of its type. But it is also worth looking at some of the ways in which the newsweekly treatment influenced the reporting of the same story by such august journalistic institutions as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. "It was a doomsday cult with computers, and through the Internet it told the world exactly what it believed and what it

would do." This was the breathless lead of the front page *Washington Post* story by Joel Achenbach, Laurie Goodstein, and Marc Fisher (it took three reporters to come up with that?) on March 28th. The three went on:

The 39 people found dead of suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., were Internet Web site designers who called their company Higher Source. They were also members of a cult that mixed end-of-the-world Christian-style eschatology with a space-alien obsession several steps beyond that on television's "The X-Files."

This is the beginning of the *Post's* exhaustive rehearsal of the cult's lunatic beliefs—a project aided immeasurably by the fact that these beliefs were set out for Web surfers under alt.suicide, alt.support.depression, alt.abuse.recovery, alt.abuse.offender.recovery, and, of course, www.heavensgate.com. "According to the Web site," wrote Achenbach/Goodstein/Fisher, "the group believed that earthly society is controlled by demonic extraterrestrials, 'Luciferians.' An apocalypse is nigh. The Earth is about to be 'recycled,' or 'spaded under,' so that it could serve as a garden for a future human civilization."

And so on at mind-numbing length. A sidebar offered several more lengthy quotations from the Web site, and a profile by Mr. Fisher and Ms. Goodstein of Applewhite, complete with further examples of his idiotic "philosophy" rounded out the coverage. This is Web-site journalism not only in the sense that it has been pulled off the Web, but also in the sense that it partakes of the Web's system of value—namely that all points of view, including the stupid, the jejune, the erroneous, and the lunatic, are equally worthy of their space. A completely separate piece in the *Post's* bumper coverage of March 28 by Tom Kenworthy and John Schwartz was devoted to the Internet angle exclusively. Kenworthy/Schwartz produced its own "expert," Paul Saffo, of the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California, who was reassuring:

The fact that some “wackos” use the Web to broadcast their views, Saffo said, does not show that the World Wide Web is a haven for “computer cults.” Instead, he said, the group’s use of the Web is just another example of the fact that “it’s a compelling medium, and the more people who are on it, the more it will be used for different purposes,” from the commonplace to the bizarre.

In the Achenbach/Goodstein/Fisher article, the quotations of “experts” were supplemented by a couple from rival cult leaders, including Charles Spiegel of the Unarius Educational Foundation who rather wittily claimed that the Heaven’s Gateers were “dead wrong”—because the aliens weren’t going to arrive until 2001. One Felix Clairvoyant, leader of the San Francisco chapter of the Raelians, similarly dissociated himself from the San Diego suicides. “We have nothing to do with groups like that. Groups that commit suicide,” Mr. Clairvoyant told the *Post*. “We’re a very balanced group.” And, relatively speaking, they are, too. In their theology, E.T. doesn’t arrive until 2035.

Ponderously, the *Post* writers went on to inform us (surely redundantly?) that “there have arisen a number of New Age-type groups, particularly in the western United States, who take a religious attitude toward extraterrestrials, the aliens playing a secular role that once upon a time would have been reserved for angels or messiahs. The Heaven’s Gate group took such beliefs to a tragic extreme.” It is a banality worthy of *Time* itself. Nor was the quality of thought and writing all that it might have been even in *The New York Times*, which assigned its religious affairs correspondent, Gustav Niebuhr, to its front page analysis piece. “On the Furthest Fringes of Millennialism” his piece was headed—and, after the jump to page A-18, “A Fringe Millennialist Group that Used Disconnected Elements of Christianity.” Niebuhr solemnly informed his readers that, “in essence, its teachings boiled down to a belief in exalted purpose for a few, combined with an exceptionally grim view of life on an Earth where evil was in

control—a heady mixture of profound hope amid utter isolation.”

A heady mixture? Well, let it pass. “Heaven’s Gate,” he went on, “left no shortage of clues as to its negative thinking about the value of this-worldly life. The group subscribed to a gnostic religious view of the soul as a separate and superior being, temporarily inhabiting a physical form.” And there follows yet more elaboration of the “teachings” of Chairman “Do” as Applewhite rather comically called himself. This is a more successful elevation of his subject than Lacayo’s, but one cannot help wondering what an estimable and learned writer on religious affairs such as Niebuhr must have been thinking about his assigned task of explicating for the serious reader such theology as can be discerned in the ravings of a madman.

Bodies, wrote Do in 1995, were merely “the temporary container for the soul.” A soul, he added, could evolve to a higher level of being at which point it would receive a new physical form to house it. “The final act of metamorphosis or separation from the human kingdom,” he wrote, “is the ‘disconnect’ or separation from the human physical container or body in order to be released from the human environment.”

It goes on and on and on, later in the article, with stuff pulled off the Web site, which obviously makes the job of the reporter a lot easier, or taken from the two hundred page self-published book by members of the cult. In others of the Web site documents, Niebuhr finds that “Mr. Applewhite and Ms. Nettles are described as representatives of an extraterrestrial plane called the Kingdom of Heaven, come to Earth to offer the way leading to ‘membership’ there for those who could ‘overcome’ their attachment to money, sex and family life.” Apparently unprompted, Niebuhr compares the cult with other millenarian sects such as the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas, and a group called “The Order of the Solar Temple” who have committed group

suicides in Canada and Europe. But there was also the identikit *New York Times* analysis derived from those all-purpose social forces at work in the 1970s when the cult was founded:

The message that Mr. Applewhite and Ms. Nettles preached was well suited to a nation traumatized by the loss of the war in Vietnam, the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon and years of social upheaval and violence. They were both anti-establishment and puritanical, calling for total separation from society, simple living with shared resources and adherence to a moral code that eschewed drink, drugs and sex.

Niebuhr, like other commentators, noted that what seemed to have ultimately produced the suicides was a rejection of the cult by the world at large after a proselytizing tour in 1994 and the publication of documents on the Web site in 1995, which “drew a mixed response, but the prevailing reaction struck the group as ‘ridicule, hostility or both.’”

Ominously, given what was to take place near San Diego this week, Heaven’s Gate read this response as final, an indication that its mission was over, that the “weeds” of humanity had taken over Earth’s “garden,” and that civilization was finished. “This was the signal,” the group wrote in its book, “for us to begin our preparations to return home.”

But there must be more to such sober and serious treatment of mere nonsense and fanciful speculation than an attempt to imitate the supermarket newsmagazines. One clue to the impulse behind it comes from a look back at the coverage of the Jim Jones, “People’s Temple” story of 1978. That story, of course, had political, racial, and even diplomatic dimensions which made it a weightier and more worthy subject than Heaven’s Gate. But there was also a difference in the press’s coverage of it, even at *Time*, which devoted a great deal of space to

mostly futile attempts by the “cult experts” of the day to explain the difference between a “cult” and a religion. Presumably the editorial judgment of eighteen and a half years ago was that readers needed reassuring that this kind of “religion” was utterly aberrational. What if the Pope decided to order *his* followers to commit suicide? And to a man (or woman) the experts assured their public that no such thing could happen.

Today the journalistic impulse is exactly opposite. It is to make, instead of a division, a conjunction between the religious and the merely kooky. All beliefs involving the supernatural are of equal weight and authority in the implicit theology of the World Wide Web—a doctrine which is, of course, a certain way toward the end of relieving traditional religious beliefs of such weight and authority as they may have left among their beleaguered believers. The end-piece essay in *Time* by Pico Iyer makes this point all but explicit:

One man’s faith is . . . impossible for a non-believer to fathom: in recent days, millions were celebrating the idea that a man actually rose from the dead, while another doubtless felt that he was committing a holy act that would gain him a place in heaven when he strapped a bomb to his body and entered a Tel Aviv restaurant. The leap of faith is—and has to be—a plunge into the unrational (which to skeptics seems “unreasonable”), and by its nature is a move that leaves the rest of us behind. . . . Yet who is to determine when a “cult becomes a religion, especially in a land where freedom of religion is sacrosanct? . . . And though the Heaven’s Gaters’ doctrine may seem as weird to us as ours apparently seemed to them, the wider tragedy of the cruel suicides would be if our own faith prevented us from lavishing at least as much sympathy on the group as curiosity.

And there you have it. As even Rush Limbaugh has learned to say, “everything is relative.” Have a nice millennium!

Devouring love

by Brooke Allen

Just what does it say about the New York literati that the book that has made the single biggest splash this season is a thin, poorly written volume, chockablock with bathos and cheap melodrama, dealing with the author's incestuous affair with her father? Magazine editors and media pundits have fallen over one another in their rush to book Kathryn Harrison and either tout or fulminate against her new memoir, *The Kiss*.¹ A single issue of *The New York Observer* contained three pieces on it, including a parody; the ever-topical *New Yorker* made a bid to publish an excerpt in its pages. (*New Yorker* readers were deprived of this treat when Random House pushed *The Kiss*'s publication inconveniently forward.) Kathryn Harrison and her husband, Colin, a writer and editor, have eagerly encouraged the feeding frenzy, Kathryn by giving soulful interviews and striking sexy poses in the mags, Colin by writing a ludicrously solemn exclusive for that serious, sensitive publication *Vogue* on his relationship with his wife and how her sordid past has affected—no, enriched—their marriage.

In recent years, so many people have claimed some sort of victim status, whether in print or on "Oprah," that a slight backlash has occurred, and poor-little-me authors have taken note and changed their tune. Even Fergie, the Duchess of York, has

in her recent memoir taken care to place the blame for her disgrace (at least overtly) on no one but herself: "I pinned on my scarlet letter—mine would be a T, for toe-sucking," she writes, not without grim humor. Ms. Harrison tries to play the same game. She is aware that the fact that she was twenty years old at the time she began sleeping with her father deprives her of victim status in the eyes of many, and she is careful not to shirk her share of responsibility in the matter. "There are no heroes and no villains in this story," she says righteously.

Wrong. In the narrative as Harrison presents it, there are only villains—or rather, irresponsible, self-obsessed people. The central figure of this particular family drama is Kathryn's mother, whom the child loves obsessively but who eludes her until the very end. She gave birth to Kathryn while still a teenager, and split up with her husband not long afterwards; soon, finding motherhood demanding and exhausting, she abdicated much of the responsibility for child-rearing to her own mother, a neurotic woman whom Harrison describes as screaming uncontrollably whenever her sexy daughter went out on a date.

At one time during Kathryn's early childhood the mother lived alone in one apartment while the child and her grandparents lived in another. As time went on, however, the family appears to have grown closer, perhaps because the mother herself began to grow up. At any rate, mother and daughter

¹ *The Kiss*, by Kathryn Harrison; Random House, 224 pages, \$20.

were close enough to act out the traditional mother-daughter power struggle, a universal, even banal scenario which Ms. Harrison seems to see as unique to her own situation. "Even at the age of seven I understand . . . that my mother's love for me (like her mother's for her) depends on my capitulation." So what else is new? Mothers have always been like that, and will be to the end of time.

It is not too surprising to discover that once Kathryn hit adolescence, she struck out at her mother through anorexia. "*You want thin?* I remember thinking, *I'll give you thin. I'll define thin, not you.*" She has reclaimed her sexuality from her mother, and her mother, she claims, is furious. "The one thing she can't stand about my being so thin is that I don't menstruate: I lose my capacity to get pregnant, to be in a danger of the kind that precipitated the abrupt fall from grace she endured. . . . she takes me to doctor after doctor, accompanying me into the consulting room and even the examining room." Perhaps—just perhaps—Harrison is right to interpret her mother's feelings as rage, but it seems to me that a mother who watches her child waste away might be genuinely, and desperately, worried.

The mother's next iniquity is to insist that her daughter be fitted for a diaphragm. The doctor says that it can't be done without breaking the girl's hymen; the mother insists; the doctor proceeds to insert a graduated series of plastic dildos into Kathryn's vagina, until one comes out smeared with blood. Symbolic rape by the mother seems to be a popular theme these days; the young Haitian writer Edwige Danticat featured it in her pretentious, overrated (but highly praised) book *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In Harrison's case, it is likely that her mother meant, however misguidedly, to protect her. But Harrison treats the incident with narcissistic melodrama: "What was murdered that day: girlhood, hope, any notion of being safe anywhere, with anyone."

When Kathryn's lecherous father reenters her life after a gap of ten years, Kathryn, now twenty, is more than ready for him.

Their mutual rage against the rejecting mother has focused their attention on one another; without actually discussing it, they realize that a sexual alliance between father and daughter is the most efficient way of hurting her. At the airport, upon his departure, he gives Kathryn the by now famous kiss: "My father pushes his tongue deep into my mouth; wet, insistent, exploring, then withdrawn."

Oooh, grody to the max! Kathryn is (no kidding) disturbed by the incident; when she asks her boyfriend back in college whether he thinks it was weird, he yells "Yes, it's weird! Of course it's weird! It's wrong!" Wise words indeed, but after such a display of horse sense the boyfriend, inevitably, is history, and the mesmerized Kathryn embraces her destiny. Her wish to possess, devour, and destroy her mother, however, is not quelled. When her mother lies dying of cancer, Kathryn never quits her side: "You're always there, aren't you?" the mother asks, a little nervously it seems; "Yes, I say," writes Harrison. "Even when I'm with him, I'm standing by your bed. Especially then." All this comes to a final climax in a nasty necrophilic scene at the funeral home where the mother's corpse is reposing. Kathryn asks to be left alone with the body, and when the undertaker leaves she lets loose. "I reach under the bottom half of the lid for the catch to unlock it but find none. I slip my hand down as far as I can, past her knees, past the hem of her white dress. I want to touch and know all of her, want her feet in my palms." It almost makes you feel sorry for poor Mom.

In an interview sent out with the review copies of *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison is quoted as saying, "*The Kiss* was a book I couldn't avoid, rather than one I set out to write," and refers to "the implicit dishonesty of keeping a secret such as this." The concept of honesty, and Harrison's courage in being so very honest, is also stressed in the quotes that Random House has chosen to adorn the book jacket. Philip Lopate writes of the author's "consummate artistry and

honesty;" Tobias Wolff marvels at "the courage it took to write this book;" Mary Karr, the author of a more intelligent family memoir, lauds Ms. Harrison's "bravery," while Mary Gordon, the perpetrator of an execrable one (of which more later), asserts that she is "fearless." Robert Coles (who since he endorsed the book has recanted on his puff, claiming that he didn't know Ms. Harrison had children) called the book "a moral victory."

These statements would seem to imply that honesty is always, under every circumstance, a good thing. "The truth shall make you free," as the Gospel of John tells us. Yet we would all do well to leaven this thought with Oscar Wilde's extremely sensible remark that "the truth is rarely pure, and never simple." All the people who have been bowled over by Harrison's incredible honesty—including Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the daily *New York Times* and Susan Cheever in the *Times Book Review*—really ought to remind themselves that there is honesty, and then there is indiscretion, and they are not the same thing at all. Incest is hot, as Harrison surely knew, and such a very, very honest book about such a very hot subject was sure to find a place among the literary crowd equivalent to that which the JonBenet Ramsay murder investigation has assumed for readers of *The National Enquirer*.

For Harrison's own sanity, she may well have felt that the book was one that demanded to be written. But as James Wolcott pointed out in his review of *The Kiss* in *The New Republic*, there is a difference between needing to write the book and needing to publish it. What greater good is Harrison serving by making many thousands of people privy to an intimate and shameful story that should really be between herself, her husband, her analyst, and, if she has one, her God? The public does *not* need to know, and neither, assuredly, do the Harrisons' children. If Harrison were really courageous, as her supporters assert, she would have fought her demons in private and protected her children at any cost.

Aside from that issue, which has been well worked-over in the press, there is an even deeper hypocrisy at work in *The Kiss*, a pretense that to write such a book is not an act of hostility but one of love, in particular love for her mother. Harrison dedicates the book to her mother ("Beloved: 1942–1985") and ends the narrative with a smarmy postscript in which she dreams that her dead mother appears and the two finally express the love they had never expressed in life. But the reality is that the daughter's hatred still rages, exorcised neither by the affair with the father nor by the mother's early, painful death. If Kathryn Harrison felt real love for her mother, and had come to terms with their relationship, she would have resisted the temptation to expose the beloved's coldness, her withdrawal, and her husband and daughter's betrayal of her. *The Kiss* is an act of hate, superficially against a predatory father, but in fact against a mother who, for all her myriad faults, seems to have done as well as she was able.

"They fuck you up, your mum and dad," as Philip Larkin reminded us; but children are not without weapons of their own, and many do not hesitate to use them. Another recent memoir, even nastier than Harrison's, is Mary Gordon's *The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father*,² a book which enjoyed almost as much critical favor as *The Kiss* and has not undergone the kind of backlash that *The Kiss* is now suffering:

My father died when I was seven years old. I've always thought that was the most important thing anyone could know about me. I've told his story hundreds of times, because I thought his life was extraordinarily interesting, extraordinarily complex, and in telling his story, I took on the luster of having an interesting and complex father. No one could know me very well without knowing some of the high points of his history: His riotous

² *The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father*, by Mary Gordon; Vintage, 304 pages, \$13 paper.

youth at Harvard, then in Paris and Oxford in the twenties. His career as the king of Cleveland soft porn, the editor of a "humor" magazine called *Hot Dog*. His conversion, in the thirties, from Judaism to Catholicism, his turn at the time to the political right; his becoming a Francoist, a Coughlinite.

Some thirty-five years after David Gordon's death his adoring daughter, by now a successful author and Barnard professor, decides to learn more about Dad by researching his life. Without following her along every step of her journey of discovery, let's just say that she finds out he never attended Harvard or Oxford, never went to Paris, never hobnobbed with the Fitzgeralds or Hemingways. He was born not in the United States but in Vilnius; his name at birth was not David but Israel; what education he got, he achieved on his own, a fact that Ms. Gordon, who has clearly inherited her father's values about status and success, finds peculiarly horrifying: "If my father's an autodidact," she writes, "he's at best an admirable freak, at worst pathetic." The bits about his converting and becoming a Francoist and Coughlinite are true enough, but what she had not known was that he was also a bigoted anti-Semite, a third-rate pornographer (*Hot Dog* contained far more tits and ass than humor), and a bombastic and untalented writer—a failing Ms. Gordon seems to feel more strongly than any of his other, more heinous ones.

Like so many little girls, Mary Gordon idolized her Daddy, and to his credit it does seem that, whatever his faults, he was a doting father. He was taken from her before she was old enough to see him in the light of common day, and, for whatever reason, she continued to worship him throughout her adult life, scorning the unexciting, intellectually limited mother who raised her in favor of the fantasies instilled by the more romantically minded David Gordon (a man, it should be noted, who in print referred to Albert Einstein as a "Jew-boy"). "It is possible to say that from my father I learned the sovereignty of the mind and the

imagination; from my mother that there is nothing so important as piss and shit and flesh. . . . My father's vision, less truthful, is far more full of hope." The poor mother, who did her best to impose a reality-check on her unbalanced husband, and later on her daughter's heated fantasies about him, gets small thanks.

Like Kathryn Harrison in her unrequited passion for her mother, Mary Gordon, even in middle age, has a patently sexual need to possess and devour her father. Looking at his photograph in crumbling copies of *Hot Dog*, she remarks, "I can't really think of anything because I'm so in love with the beautiful young man." And when she comes upon the picture, also in *Hot Dog*, of a nude model, "I keep wondering if my father knew her. I keep wondering whether, if he saw us both, he would think she was more beautiful than I. I'm angry at him for making me imagine him looking at her, for making me worry about my own breasts in relation to my father, a thing a daughter shouldn't have to do." Has it occurred to Ms. Gordon that part of the growing-up process, for everyone, is recognizing one's parents as sexual beings? Ms. Gordon, in her forties, goes over the loving letters her father wrote her in Greek, Latin, German, and French (she calls them "love letters," though) and preens herself on her desirability, proven by the extraordinary love that she, unequaled among children, inspired in her father. Unlike the situation in which Kathryn Harrison found herself, there was nothing unnatural in the affection David Gordon gave his child; what was unnatural was the way the daughter perceived and accepted it.

"I have had for many years, at least since my adolescence, a desire to disinter my father's body." Thus Gordon launches into an extended saga of her mission, or quest, to move her father's corpse from its burial place among his wife's relations. Why does she want to undertake this complicated and expensive procedure? Because her mother's family, with whom he is buried, are not "on

his level"; he is "above all of them." So Gordon collects the many requisite affidavits, organizes a graveside ceremony presided over by a priest, and enjoys herself shopping for a tombstone (she favors the highly decorated sort, with its whiff of overwrought, Victorian mourning—"it is one of the ways I would like to live: shut up in a dark house, thinking only of my father"—and choosing a suitably dramatic outfit, including a Jackie Kennedy mantilla ("I guess it's the closest you can come to a bridal veil," observes a snide friend). She likes the new cemetery, where she and her father will lie together for eternity, far from her mother's unappealing and unglamorous family; but "I note," she says, "with sadness, that my father and I will not be buried among Jews." One can only imagine how much David Gordon would have relished finding himself among the chosen people on Judgment Day.

Love, love, love, endless love, devouring love. But is it really love? David Gordon sought distinction his entire life, but he was undistinguished by birth, talent, and intelligence. His life was obscure, and a daughter who truly loved him—who loved him without selfishness—would have been kind enough to let it remain so. "I am my father's only witness," she writes. "Either I must be silent about him, or if I speak, I must expose him." And later: "Does the fact that he is, by every standard, a failure, relieve me of the responsibility of exposing him? And the fact that he is dead?"

There is only one proper answer to that: YES. The world does not need to know about David Gordon's failings. He was not famous or influential, he was no Ezra Pound or Paul de Man; if his daughter, his "only witness," had any genuine love for the man she would let him rest in peace, literally and figuratively. "My desire, my need to punish my mother is very great" (and punish her she did, with this book and with an unspeakably repulsive article about the woman, by then aged and helpless, in *The New York Times Magazine*). "I am con-

scious of no need to punish my father." Oh, really?

It is no crime, certainly, to feel rage against your parents. But in order to form and give meaning to a real work of art, the rage must be acknowledged, not hidden away in an ooze of insincere forgiveness. One of the great novels of all time, *The Way of All Flesh*, is inspired almost purely by Samuel Butler's rage against his family, a rage that finally extends to that family's social class, its culture, its country, and its century. But Butler understood his own hatred, and what's more he believed in it. Gordon and Harrison feel the hatred, but mistakenly think that forgiveness and "closure"—one of the most overworked concepts in contemporary literature and psychobabble—is of the essence. A very different but equally unpleasant writer, Jamaica Kincaid, takes the opposite tack in her books *Annie John* (1983, Farrar, Straus & Giroux) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996, Farrar, Straus & Giroux): she has all the requisite bile, especially against her unfortunate mother, but not the requisite talent or intelligence.

Suzannah Lessard's *The Architect of Desire*³ is another example of the current trend for taking a nasty little family story, which would far better have remained decently buried, and trying to gussie it up with pretensions of mythic, universal import—to turn it into Greek tragedy, in fact. Lessard is the great-granddaughter of Stanford White, arguably America's greatest architect. She grew up, along with her four younger sisters, at Box Hill, the White family estate on Long Island, surrounded by grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Her father, who married into the White family, is a composer; her uncle, Bobby White, who lived with his family next door, a sculptor. The large extended family feels the glamour of the Stanford White legend, and feel that

3 *The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family*, by Suzannah Lessard; The Dial Press, 334 pages, \$24.95.

they are, to a large degree, special. But of course Stanford White's legacy included not only the many beautiful edifices that still grace Manhattan and Long Island, but a history of sexual excess and high jinks culminating in White's murder, in 1906, by a jealous husband.

Lessard tries to apply a nonsensical architectural metaphor to her narrative. "I have come to see family history as similar to architecture in certain ways. Like architecture, it is quiet. It encompasses, but does not necessarily demand attention. . . . The correlation between architecture and interior life allows us to relive past visions by simply entering the architecture those visions produced?" Huh? She then narrates, at excruciating length, her own dull family history side by side with Stanford White's life of profligacy, genius, and excess—a frequently told tale, and one that does not gain from the retelling. She drops heavy hints about how the Red Cottage, the Lessard home at Box Hill, was "not safe for children," about "something dark right there in the light" and "the random destruction at home," but never specifies what any of this might be. Uncle Bobby gropes the teenage Suzannah at parties, but nothing else seems too terribly dreadful. Then at last, practically on the very last page, it comes out. Suzannah and her sisters jolt their collectively repressed memories, and suddenly recall that Daddy sneaked into their rooms at night when they were children to fondle their private parts.

Well, I felt like asking, is that all? That old

incest tale again? After so many revelations, incest is really getting a little banal; I thought that this time the deep dark secret might have proved to be something *really* interesting. But no: the five sisters get together, weep, do a little woman-to-woman bonding, and that's the end of it. A sordid and seedy family story, nothing more. But the family is connected, albeit at several generations' remove, with Stanford White—a celebrity! And a scandalous celebrity at that! And so there is a book to be got out of it, and an obscure family's unhappiness to be made public.

All the rules, of course, go out the window when a real work of art is in question. A real work of art can be as vicious, as bitter, as ugly, and as sordid as it likes. There have been some great family memoirs which have pulled no punches: Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, for example, or J. R. Ackerley's *My Father and Myself*. Mary Karr's recent book *The Liar's Club* (1996, Penguin) is, if not destined to be a classic, at least an honorable piece of work, and it does not exactly gloss over the grimmer aspects of family life. But Harrison, Gordon, and Lessard are too blinkered by their own narcissism to achieve any distance. If you're looking for a perceptive, enlightening work of art, their hypocrisy and self-importance will drive you mad. If, on the other hand, it's simply gossip and scandal you crave, you'd do far better to have a look at Mia Farrow's less pretentious tell-all, *What Falls Away* (1997, Doubleday). Now *there's* an interesting life.

Against the old clichés

by Anne Applebaum

My introduction to European history began with a map. The peninsula of Europe lay stretched out over a blackboard; the lecturer drew an imaginary line down the center. Empires shifted, he explained, but this line had remained the same. To the west of it lay the Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the “progressive” Great Powers, and what we learned during the Cold War to call “the West.” To the east lay barbarism, feudal states, Russia and Austria-Hungary, and what was then known as “the Communist bloc.”

The lecturer explained that the division of Europe was nothing new: it had its origins in deep cultural and political differences, land use patterns, the absence of capitalism in the East, the scientific revolution in the West. In all cases and at all times, the peoples to the west of the imaginary line had been more sophisticated, more progressive, more advanced. The peoples to the east were slower to develop, less democratic, less “European.” The peoples to the west of that line would, therefore, be the object of the next nine months of study.

It only takes a few swift sentences early on in his monumental *Europe: A History*¹ for Norman Davies to dispense with that sort of history. After all, he notes, there are many dividing lines which shaped the history of Europe. Some of the most important—in

terms of climate, culture, family structure—divide north from south rather than east from west. Some of the most permanent—like that which separates Catholic and Orthodox Christianity—have nothing to do with who is and who isn’t now in NATO, or who was or wasn’t in the Holy Roman Empire. Nor did all of the lines divide Europe exactly as one might think. During large chunks of history, Byzantium was far more sophisticated, scientifically and politically, than the old Western Roman Empire, for example.

Certainly it isn’t the case that at all times, and in all places, the division of Europe which persisted through the second half of the twentieth century remained the same. Contemporary events shape our idea of which countries are and are not meant to be “progressive,” and in our era, the event which has most shaped history is the Second World War and its aftermath. The Allied Scheme of History—of which more later—produced a number of assumptions, all of which I also distinctly remember being taught: the belief that the “Atlantic Community” is the pinnacle of progress, the demonization of everything German, the generally indulgent view of both the tsarist empire and even the Soviet Union, at least in its wartime role, and the unspoken acceptance of the division of Europe as “natural.”

Powerful though these assumptions and geographical prejudices may be, Professor

¹ *Europe: A History*, by Norman Davies; Oxford University Press, 1,365 pages, \$25.

Davies ridicules their historical basis so thoroughly that it seems surprising no one else has thought to do it before. After all, we live in an era of hyper-historical consciousness, in which the prejudices of our historians have themselves become the subject of learned theses. In recent years, women have been discovered, the history of the illiterate lower classes has been unearthed, the stories of slaves and chambermaids have been published to great acclaim. Only our geographical prejudices have remained curiously intact—and Norman Davies was precisely the man to dissect them. His own family is Welsh, his wife's family is from what is now Ukraine, and he is a British scholar whose two-volume history of Poland, *God's Playground*, has become, in translation, the standard text in many Polish schools. With family ties and professional interests on Europe's peripheries, he has long been privately and publicly critical of the way "European" history has come to mean the history of England, France, Germany, and very occasionally Italy and Spain.

Most historians are content merely to complain about such things over sherry and leave it at that. Professor Davies took it upon himself to correct the prejudices he perceived, however, and the result is this book: the story of Europe from Indo-European tribes to the present, in which the many strands of European history—not only English and French but Slavic, Irish, Spanish, Swiss, Dutch, Jewish, and Scandinavian—are at last woven together. Although largely narrative history, the main text is enhanced by a series of "capsules" of social and intellectual history, about thirty-five to a chapter, on subjects ranging from the origins of the goose step to the evolution of table manners to the history of the Papal Index. To give some added flavor of different attitudes of different times, each chapter also ends with a detailed description of a scene which was, in one way or the other, pivotal to the era it describes: the fall of Syracuse, the construction of Bernini's Rome, Whitehall on August 3, 1914.

Despite all of these distractions, Professor

Davies does manage to keep up, throughout a thousand pages and two thousand years, his basic theme. "For some reason," he writes, "it has been the fashion among some historians to minimize the impact of the Magyars . . . all this means is that the Magyars did not reach Cambridge." He then goes on to list the effects of the great Magyar invasion of the ninth century: within sixty years they helped form modern Hungary, as well as Bohemia, Poland, Serbia and Croatia, Austria and Germany; they permanently separated the northern Slavs from their southern cousins; they opened the way for German colonists to come down the Danube. "Only armchair historians, sitting in a backwater of an offshore island, might judge such developments trivial."

Not all of this book, however, is about reviving that which is forgotten. Professor Davies is also adept at tracing the dissemination of ideas from their origins to the nether regions of Europe, tossing out odd bits of erudition on the way: reintegrating the history of East and West Europe also means describing the profound effect which the latter had upon the former. Discussing the Enlightenment, he pays due homage to Voltaire and friends, as any traditional textbook would—and then points out that the ideas of the Enlightenment were put to use "for different purposes in different countries." The Polish king adopted Rousseau's theories of education. In Britain, Enlightenment ideas influenced the liberal wing of the Establishment. In the American colonies, they were invoked by revolutionaries who opposed the British Establishment. In France, Spain, and Italy, they inspired intellectuals who opposed monarchy; on the other hand, Frederick II of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia selectively adopted them as ruling principles.

Davies resists traditional classifications, like the simple division of post-Reformation Europe into the Protestant North and Catholic South. As one might expect of a historian of Eastern Europe, he dwells upon the linguistic and cultural foundations of

nations, or, more normally, lack thereof. On the other hand, he gives the main events their due, noting that “there is a universal quality about the French Revolution which does not pertain to any of Europe’s other convulsions,” and proceeding to examine the impact of that particular event at length. The result is learned, quirky, and inclusive at the same time. Perhaps more importantly, in this age of overspecialization, it is readable: Davies’ achievement is literary as much as it is historical. He makes a special plea on behalf of readable history, citing the example of Thomas Carlyle: “Imaginative historians such as Thomas Carlyle have not simply been censured for an excess of poetic license. They have been forgotten. Yet Carlyle’s convictions on the relationship of history and poetry are at least worthy of consideration.”

If there is an important flaw in the structure of the book, it is Davies’ insistence upon downgrading the efforts of his predecessors, whom he derides as the promulgators of cliché and received wisdom, in order to explain why he is writing the history of Europe the way he is writing it. Had he been more tactful, he might have avoided some of the inevitable revenge the book has incurred. But at least the revenge has been interesting. In fact, the objections to *Europe: A History* have been so acrimonious that they would themselves fit very well into one of Norman Davies’ capsules: they make a curious intellectual snapshot of the state of Anglo-American intellectuals at the end of the twentieth century.

The British objections are the mildest, and most predictable. Paul Preston, for example, reviewing the book in the *London Times Higher Education Supplement* attributes the success of Norman Davies’ book in Britain to the enthusiasm of “right-wing” reviewers. He also explains the *London Times*’s decision to serialize extracts from the book as a ploy designed to “target Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party.” All very strange, since Norman Davies votes Labor and has nothing to do with the Con-

servative Party, and since one of the most enthusiastic reviews in Britain came from the outspokenly left-wing writer Neal Ascherson, in the outspokenly left-wing *London Review of Books*. Perhaps the explanation lies somewhere in Professor Preston’s dismissal of Davies’ “bitter demolition of communism:” alas, a healthy dislike of Communism is still not quite acceptable in the higher realms of academe.

Stranger still was the write-up which *Europe: A History* received in *The New York Times*. Theodore Rabb, in a long, humorless, and surprisingly nasty review, unaccountably dismisses the main of the book (“as it happens, he redresses the East-West imbalance only occasionally”) and goes on to describe it as having “inaccuracies, on average, every other page.” Yet if this is so, Rabb hasn’t done a very good job identifying them. Some of the “mistakes” are subjective judgments—Rabb describes, for example, Davies’ account of Copernicus as “misunderstood” without explaining why. Sometimes Rabb is simply incorrect: he complains that “William Harvey does not make it into the book” when in fact he does, on page 1,272. And while plenty of other reviewers noticed mistakes, most forgave them, as did one reviewer, on the grounds that “any book of this scope and this scale, written by a single author, would contain some errors in those fields which were not the author’s special subject.” While Oxford University Press is at fault for not assigning special fact-checkers to this book, and doubly at fault for having had it copy read in India (a new fashion in publishing, I am told), the real interest of the book is its style and its brilliantly sustained thesis—a thesis, as I say, that Rabb hardly mentions in his review. In any case, a new error-free edition is already due to appear in June.

But if my guess is correct, Professor Rabb’s motivation for attacking the book is not its errors. The real motivation must lie in Professor Rabb’s obscure comments about Jewish matters. Among other things, Davies stands accused of “singularly and irrelevantly” describing the historian Simon

Schama as Jewish, the “equating of the now notorious German police battalion in the Otwock ghetto in 1942 with the role of Jews in the postwar Communist security forces in Poland,” as well as a “skewed” discussion of usury and “errors about the origins of ghettos.” Why it is wrong to describe Simon Schama as Jewish, since he is Jewish and writes about being Jewish; what exactly is skewed about Davies’ discussion of usury or the origins of ghettos, both of which have struck other historians as perfectly acceptable; none of this is explained. Rabb, it seems, is fond of making vague and unsubstantiated accusations in reviews, and has been caught doing so on at least one previous occasion.

As for the accusation concerning Battalion 101 and its behavior in Otwock, these were also picked up in a series of letters to the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement* by the historian Abraham Brumberg and a woman named Esther Kinsky, who even took it upon herself to send a plaintive form letter around London, asking supporters to “contribute your opinion on this matter and to help instigate a public debate.” What all appear to object to was Norman Davies’ description of Nazi atrocities and Jewish postwar cooperation with Communist atrocities in the same capsule. Nothing Davies writes is untrue, but Brumberg feels that describing the two on the same page “helps to camouflage the unique nature of the German holocaust.”

Davies himself, also in a letter to the *TLS*, claims that “I do not equate; I juxtapose, and sometimes invite a comparison.” Reading the capsule myself, I understood that Davies was trying to point out that ordinary people behave badly when faced with certain kinds of moral dilemmas, whatever their nationality. He quotes from a famous study of the Otwock incident, which asked “if the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under the circumstances, what group of men cannot?” It was certainly provocative to ask whether Jews could also have become killers under certain circumstances, but then it is about time that

Jews in the West learn to stop behaving as if the uniqueness of the Holocaust automatically excludes Jews from being accused of any form of bad behavior. It is also about time that historians acknowledge that, in the postwar era, there were some Jews who took part in Communist atrocities, and learn to discuss this fact as part of history, asking why it might have happened: suppressing it will simply create the anti-Semitism we should be attempting to eradicate. A decent book about the subject would help clear the air. Nothing about that discussion need “camouflage the unique nature of the German holocaust” in any way. I don’t, in fact, see what one has to do with the other.

There is a background to these disputes, namely that when Norman Davies’ history of Poland, *God’s Playground*, was published in the 1980s, some historians found the book too “right-wing” and anti-Soviet: as late as 1989, a British historian told me he thought Davies’ book “biased” because it attributed the Katyn massacres to the Russians instead of the Germans. Worse, a group of American academics complained that Davies had failed to put sufficient emphasis on the role which the Poles had played in carrying out the Nazi Holocaust. Although no one spoke openly of anti-Semitism—just as Professor Rabb does not speak openly of anti-Semitism—the accusations were enough to prevent Davies from getting the tenure which he had been promised at Stanford.

Davies has always argued that it is too easy for comfortable Westerners to look for culprits among East European populations which were themselves threatened with death for helping Jews, and that it is oversimplistic to argue that all Poles behaved equally badly: after all, it was a Pole, smuggled in and out of Auschwitz at great risk by the Home Army, who first told Roosevelt about the Holocaust (Roosevelt refused to believe him). But this is not the place to conduct that particular argument. In any case, the allegation that Norman Davies is anti-Semitic, or that he denies the

importance of the Holocaust, has always been absurd: "Nazism was the most repulsive movement of modern times," he writes on page 976.

Part of what lies behind all of these criticisms, of course, is precisely the phenomenon which Davies is trying to describe, that same old Allied Scheme of History again. The Allied Scheme of History sees only one mass murderer in Europe this century, not two: Stalin could not have killed more people than Hitler because he was on our side, and it is "right-wing" to say otherwise. The Allied Scheme of History also sees only one set of victims of the Second World War: the Jews. East Europeans were not victims; on the contrary, East Europeans, whichever side they fought on, belonged "naturally" to the more primitive half of Europe, not least because they were more susceptible to primitive emotions like anti-Semitism—and never mind that while there were plenty of French officials who openly collaborated with the Nazis, there were no Polish officials.

Unfortunately, the Allied Scheme of History, which Norman Davies dismisses out of hand, is also practiced by most of Norman Davies' critics. I distinctly remember a long article in *The New York Review of Books* by Abraham Brumberg, right about the time of Ukrainian independence, dwelling upon Ukrainian anti-Semitism and predicting an unpleasant future for the new country. In fact, while there are plenty of Ukrainian anti-Semites out there, since independence, the Ukrainian state has behaved in an exemplary fashion toward its minorities, Jews included. Why does Abraham Brumberg not write long articles dwelling upon that?

But the Allied Scheme of History also makes anyone like Norman Davies, who has devoted his career to these nasty East Europeans, seem somewhat suspect. The politically correct attitude toward the region is the one promulgated by the lecturer who taught me about the "natural" divisions in Europe, or by the East European editor of the *Financial Times* of ten years back, who dismissed the tribulations of the peoples he

wrote about on the grounds that "every country has the government it deserves." It does now appear that unless you go on spouting the clichés—that the only crimes in Europe this century were Nazi crimes, and that the proper historical place for the vicious peoples of this region is on the peripheries of "civilized" Europe—then you are likely to find your book, however brilliant, however original, dismissed as "right-wing" or "anti-Semitic."

All of which is a great shame, because if the spouters of clichés win this round as well, *Europe: A History*, which was featured on bestseller lists in London for many months, may well not get the recognition it deserves in the United States. Leaving aside the arguments about who did what to whom in Europe between 1935 and 1950, Americans will then miss out on a quirky, erudite, and fascinating history of the continent whence came many of their ancestors, and much of their political culture. It isn't that often that a book as enjoyable as this appears in print, and after the initial reception this one has received in the United States, there may not be one like it again.

Idylls of old Newark

Philip Roth American Pastoral.
Houghton Mifflin, 423 pages, \$26

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Philip Roth is a writer of great comic gifts, but in *American Pastoral*, his twenty-second book, these gifts are unfortunately not much in evidence. Nostalgia and indignation alternate in setting the tone of this new novel. In the present case, Roth's aim is to create an idyllic American life for Seymour Irving Levov, to embody in him the pastoral dream of the American Jew (to become a fully assimilated American), and then to strip him of his illusions and attainments by the most cruel and irrational of means.

Roth's Levov is "the household Apollo"

of the Newark Jews, a boy so blond and handsome that he is called "the Swede." Since Jewish boys are "not athletic," the Swede is, of course, a star athlete (in several high-school sports) and therefore the idol of every Jewish kid at Weequahic High. Like Bernard Malamud's Roy Hobbs, the Swede is a "natural" at sports. But as a responsible Jewish boy, he skips a pro baseball career with the Giants in order to enter his father's business. Almost effortlessly, it seems to others, the Swede becomes a big manufacturer of ladies' gloves in Newark. Naturally, he must marry, so Roth gives him not merely a *shiksa* but Dawn Dwyer, the beautiful, talented Miss New Jersey of 1949—almost Miss America herself. Naturally, he must be successful, so Roth makes him a millionaire. And what would a Jewish millionaire do but move his family from Newark out to Old Rimrock. There, in a stone house on a farm in rural New Jersey, a place redolent with the history of the American Revolution, the Levovs try to create—like Seymour Levin in Malamud's *A New Life*—an American pastoral existence. "Why shouldn't I be where I want to be?" Seymour Levov asks. "Why shouldn't I be with *who* I want to be with? Isn't that what this country's all about?"

So it seems. As the 1950s pass into the 1960s, the Swede enjoys a sort of "utopia of rational existence." He is the complacent embodiment of liberal bourgeois commercial and domestic happiness. Dawn herself finds contentment in breeding cattle on the farm. (This seems to be how Roth conceives the pastoral theme.) The children are also a source of parental satisfaction, especially the daughter, Meredith, the apple of her father's eye.

Yet as Merry enters adolescence, signs of trouble begin to surface. Somewhere she picks up pro-Communist, antiwar rhetoric. By the mid-1960s, she has turned on her loving father as a capitalist pig who exploits his black factory workers. While other white businessmen bail out during the rising tensions, the Swede tries to keep his Newark factory open, for the sake of his black em-

ployees. But when roving gangs trash the city and Newark goes up in flames, in the riots of 1967, Levov reluctantly takes his factories offshore, to Puerto Rico or the Philippines.

But to daughter Merry he is still an entrepreneurial bloodsucker—now exploiting the colored peoples of the Third World. Merry comes to hate her mother, hate America, hate their upscale life. The last vestige of the Swede's idyll is shattered in 1968, during the Vietnam War, when the teenage daughter blows up the Old Rimrock post office, killing a local doctor, and disappears into the antiwar underground. Merry is thus the agent who "transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk."

I am not sure what to make of "the indigenous American berserk," but it seems to be crazier than, say, the Israeli, the French, or the German varieties. Roth evidently believes that there is some "deep American shit" into which families like the Levovs plunged neck-deep.

Seymour Levov, the bland Swede, I find a colorless figure. Much more interesting is the narrator of his tale, Nathan Zuckerman, a familiar alter ego for Roth and the protagonist himself of the trilogy *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983)—not to speak of stray productions like *The Counterlife* (1986). The Swede's mask has a meaning that beguiles Zuckerman. To understand his idol, Zuckerman composes this "realistic chronicle": "I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man." *American Pastoral* explores the destructive impulses that wrecked not merely families like the Levovs but whole cities like Newark. It presents Zuckerman's conclusions about the familial and social conditions that produced the

Sixties radical youth who nearly destroyed America.

For Zuckerman, the Swede is to be understood as the culmination of the American Jew's desire to abandon his ethnic parochialism and "to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals." This is the process by which the immigrant Solomon or Saul would beget a son Stephen, who would in turn beget "an authentic American" Shawn.

But the Swede is an enigma to Zuckerman precisely because his ethnic identity has been Americanized out of him:

Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the cry-baby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star.

We may very well doubt that this is an adequate résumé of Jewish qualities, but it appears to be Zuckerman's and—at least some of the time—to be Roth's. (A great many of Zuckerman's viewpoints are echoed in Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988). But inasmuch as the "real facts" about Roth's life and his attitudes are seized upon by the fictional creation Zuckerman, who invades the postmodernist Roth's autobiography, we must be cautious: Zuckerman complains of how author Roth is slyly concealing himself from us with a false show of objectivity.) In any case, Zuckerman feels "a twinge of shame and self-rejection" in the Swede's leaving behind Jewish Newark for the pastoral idyll in the WASP Republican stronghold of Old Rimrock.

Zuckerman, however, can give us no realistic explanation for why Merry Levov, a

perfectly ordinary, privileged, upper middle-class American girl, should detonate a bomb in Old Rimrock and then go underground and kill several others in Oregon. "What happened to our smart Jewish kids?" he asks. "They *are* crazy. Something is *driving* them crazy. Something has set them against everything. Something is leading them into disaster." But what that "something" is he cannot tell us.

Still, he itemizes the list: "Mark Rudd and Katherine Boudin and Jane Alpert—all in their twenties, Jewish, middle-class, college-educated, violent in behalf of the antiwar cause, committed to revolutionary change and determined to overturn the United States government." How could they have turned against the country that had given their parents such freedom and such open opportunities to become successful? How could they have bombed, killed, abandoned their families, and gone underground for the Viet Cong, the Black Panthers, or Che Guevara?

Merry, in any case, reappears in Newark some five years later. She is now living in filth as a Jain cultist in the bombed-out slums. She now believes that the killing of any life is unholy, even that of a gnat, and is slowly starving herself to death in search of selfless spiritual enlightenment. Her various conversions—political and religious—have evidently made her mad as a hatter. "Abnormality cloaked as ideology" is the way that William Orcutt, the Swede's neighbor, explains away these kids. The novel gives us little reason to think otherwise.

Although he wants to give a "realistic chronicle," Zuckerman is actually Newark's Kafka. He lives in a world where things are as meaningless as they are grotesque. Zuckerman concludes that the Swede's inscrutable mask had been adopted because he

had learned the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense. . . . The nice gentle man with his mild way of dealing with conflict and contradiction, the confident ex-athlete sensible and resourceful in any struggle with an adversary who is fair, comes up

against the adversary who is not fair—the evil ineradicable from human dealings—and he is finished. . . . Stoically he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life.

But of course it is Zuckerman who lives the double life. Obsessed with “The Angel of Time” that is consuming his few remaining years, Zuckerman at sixty-two has now had a prostate operation and is living alone, abandoned in his doll’s house, without a woman and without sex. He calls himself “purely a writer,” someone “whose aging powers had now but a single and unswerving aim, a man who would be seeking his solace, like it or not, nowhere but in sentences.” This is a remarkable development for any of Roth’s sex-crazed protagonists. But Zuckerman has dealt with it by retiring to a place much like Malamud’s Bennington, “about ten miles from a college town called Athena.” Alluding to the Malamud figure in *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman remarks: “I met a famous writer there when I was just starting out. Nobody mentions him much anymore, his sense of virtue is too narrow for readers now, but he was revered back then. Lived like a hermit. Reclusion looked awfully austere to a kid. He maintained it solved his problems. Now it solves mine.”

Living like a hermit, going back over their boyhood past, trying to make sense of the Swede’s life—all of this is Zuckerman’s way of recovering his “urban pastoral”:

Am I wrong to think that we delighted in living there [in Newark]? No delusions are more familiar than those inspired in the elderly by nostalgia, but am I completely mistaken to think that living as well-born children in Renaissance Florence could not have held a candle to growing up within aromatic range of Tabachnik’s pickle barrels?

Like Proust’s madeleine, Tabachnik’s pickles obliterate time so that the word “death”

comes to have no meaning to Zuckerman. The most vivid writing in *American Pastoral* he devotes to Newark as it used to be—as a commercial center before the racial problems began. How ladies’ gloves were manufactured in the days when there *was* a glove industry—how the leather was tanned, stretched, dyed, cut, lined, sewn, sized, boxed, and shipped—it is *this* that inspires Zuckerman’s most lyrical prose. He knows enough to check his own “bullshit-nostalgia,” but he cannot help glorying in the old days, when

there was a factory where somebody was making something in every side street. Now there’s a liquor store in every street—a liquor store, a pizza stand, and a seedy storefront church. Everything else in ruins or boarded up. But when my father bought the factory, a stone’s throw away Kiler made watercoolers, Fortgang made fire alarms, Lasky made corsets, Robbins made pillows, Honig made pen points. . . . The major industry now is car theft. . . . It’s something horrible. [Black kids] ram cop cars in broad daylight. Front-end collisions. To explode the air bags. . . . Wheeling the car in circles at tremendous speeds. Killing pedestrians means nothing to them. Killing motorists means nothing to them. Killing *themselves* means nothing to them.

The Swede, who employed a great many blacks, tried to keep his factory open through the riots, but, as liberal as he is, he explodes at the black racists and craven politicians who destroyed the old Newark:

A whole business is going down the drain because of that son of a bitch LeRoi Jones, that Peek-A-Boo-Boopy-Do, whatever the hell he calls himself in that goddamn hat. I built this with my *hands*! With my blood! They think somebody gave it to me? Who? Who gave it to me? Who gave me anything, ever? Nobody! What I have I built! With work—w-o-r-k! But they took that city and now they are going to take that business and everything that I built up a day at a time, an *inch* at a time, and they are going to leave it *all* in

ruins! And that'll do 'em a world of good!
They burn down their own houses—that'll
show whitey!

The burden of *American Pastoral* is thus Zuckerman-Roth's belief that it is foolish for any Jew to think that he can ever fully assimilate into gentile America or shape a marriage, a home, or a business according to rational principles that make for continuing stability in life. If the *goyim* don't get you, your dream will be destroyed from within by the kids. Although he seems a perfect atheist, Zuckerman's world is governed by the God of Job, who is not above driving the children crazy to punish their fathers for thinking that a secure Jewish existence is a given thing—even in America.

Mr. Warren's profession

Joseph Blotner

Robert Penn Warren: A Biography.
Random House, 585 pages, \$35

reviewed by Richard Tillinghast

Joseph Blotner, Faulkner's biographer, has now brought his considerable abilities to bear on the life and work of Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989), who began as a member of the extraordinary group of writers starting out in Tennessee during the Twenties, many of them students of John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt University. Blotner vividly renders Warren's long and preternaturally productive career and makes a convincing case for him in his crowning years as "America's preeminent man of letters, master of genres, prodigiously creative, heavy with awards and prizes honoring his genius."

These are high claims, but Warren was the author of some forty books, was America's first Poet Laureate, won the Pulitzer Prize three times, and was given just about every other honor available to an American writer. With Cleanth Brooks, he edited *Understanding Poetry*, a textbook that made

close readers of a generation of American college students, revolutionizing the study of poetry, which heretofore had focused on literary history and biography to the neglect of actual poems. Though he curtly rejected for himself the label of New Critic—perhaps regarding it as reductive—he was an ornament of the school. Blotner concludes the sentence I partially quoted above with a kind of assessment rarely encountered in the current age of the biographer as character assassin and performance artist: "Robert Penn Warren was also that rare being, a genuinely good man."

Blotner is an old-fashioned biographer who has written an imminently readable book which puts its subject squarely at center stage: he does not refer to his subject by his first name, does not attempt to correct his political views, does not set out to dig up dirt or psychoanalyze. What emerges in the nearly six hundred pages of this book is a solidly researched and very welcome account of a figure so central to our literature that he may easily be taken for granted.

An artist need not be a genius to produce great work, but certain great artists are best described by the term, and Warren was one of them. Matriculating at Vanderbilt at age sixteen, the Kentuckian made an immediate impression on older student writers like Allen Tate, who described him: "Turning round I saw the most remarkable looking boy I had ever laid eyes on. He was tall and thin, and when he walked across the room he made a sliding shuffle, as if his bones didn't belong to one another. . . . This remarkable young man was 'Red,' Robert Penn Warren, the most gifted person I have ever known."

The young man soon outgrew the impression of uncoordinated frailty he gave; "Red" made himself into a powerful physical specimen. A recurring motif in this book is the vigorous regimen Warren followed throughout his life: swimming a mile in the morning, working out with barbells, walking as many as five miles a day, snowshoeing through the woods around his house in

Vermont. An observer described him at seventy-four: "his thinning red hair sweat-plastered across his skull and his face flushed with exertion, he looks like an aged fighting cock." When he was almost eighty a physician treating him for prostate cancer and severe osteoarthritis was surprised to learn that he was still lifting weights and doing more than one hundred knee squats a day. This energy and exertion are reflective of the discipline and force with which Warren wrote.

If, as Edmund Wilson proposed, the bow is not vouchsafed until the wound is incurred, Warren's wounding happened when at age sixteen his left eye was severely damaged by a baseball-sized chunk of coal his younger brother threw over a hedge, not knowing that Warren was lying on the ground, deep in thought, on the other side. The eye would continue to torment him, and he would eventually lose the sight in it altogether. The accident spoiled his dream of going to Annapolis; he would instead go to college fifty miles south of his home town of Guthrie, Kentucky, at Vanderbilt, where he made friends and found his vocation.

The wonderful thing about a biography that concentrates on telling a story is that the reader has all the material to ponder for himself the narrative of a lifetime, with its good luck and bad luck and unpredictable twists of fate. Warren's father had written poetry in his youth and had aspired to a literary career, but ended up as a banker, merchant, and landowner, eventually failing in these endeavors. Later in life Robert Penn Warren would comment on the fate that led him to succeed in something his father would have liked to pursue. Completing another circle, Warren's son, Gabriel, would become a sailor and boat builder, realizing in the next generation his father's ambition to make a life at sea. Robert Penn Warren's daughter is the distinguished poet Rosanna Warren.

Another pleasure of this book is reading Blotner's lucid account of the academic and

literary life as it was lived at the height of his subject's career. He recounts the sad history of Vanderbilt's failure to recognize and support the literary movement that was exploding in its classrooms and in the discussion group that spawned the influential magazine *The Fugitive* during the 1920s, and its 1930 agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*. In the same way that it lost John Crowe Ransom to tiny Kenyon College in Ohio, Warren's alma mater strung him along with the provisional appointments familiar to those on the lower rungs of academia's tenure ladder until the young writer was offered more attractive and remunerative work at Louisiana State University, which Huey P. Long, "The Kingfish," was determined to make into a major university.

At LSU, Warren's encounter with Long provided the material that would help establish him as novelist, editor, and critic and supply him with a lifetime of royalties. Long was "a political genius," in Warren's words, who played many roles: "vulgarian, buffoon, clown, dude, sentimental dreamer, man of ruthless action, coward, wit, philosopher, orator." The rise and fall of Huey Long became the subject first of a play, *Proud Flesh*, which Warren wrote in the late 1930s. "The whole thing is to be in five acts, and twelve scenes," Warren wrote Kenneth Burke, "each act being introduced by a chorus. The choruses are: highway, cops, football players, steel construction workers on the new capitol, the women who are connected with Governor Strong, and the surgeons." The play would—perhaps fortunately, given this sketch of what it novel *All the King's Men*, and Governor Strong would become Willie Stark.

None of Warren's ten novels has received the attention accorded to *All the King's Men*, a bestseller and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1946. The book has been called the definitive American political novel. Willie Stark and Huey Long are probably inextricable in the minds of most readers with a knowledge of Southern politics. Warren commented later in his life:

"When I am asked how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30s, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and if Huey Long had not existed, the novel would never have been written." Still, its author chose to emphasize that it was primarily a work of fiction. The controlling image of this book is the highway as an emblem of the brutality of populist, machine-style politics, with its parallels to the fascism that Warren observed in Italy while he was writing the novel there during the late 1930s: "You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires." That's only the first half of the sentence, which continues for eighty-eight more words.

The stylistic debt to Faulkner is obvious; but we miss a lot if we think of Warren purely as a Southern writer. The book is as much about the existential struggle of its narrator, Jack Burden, as it is about Southern politics; Jack Burden, a "political operative" in today's lingo, is the spiritual ancestor of Walker Percy's conflicted heroes. His wisecracking tone has something in common, too, with Raymond Chandler's first-person narrators. Here is an example of Jack Burden's sardonic voice:

Then I went over and sat beside the Dumonde girl, who had been provided for my delight. She was a prettyish, dark girl, well got-up but lacking something, too brittle and vivacious, with a trick of lassoing you with her anxious brown eyes and fluttering the eyelids as she cinched the rope and then saying what her mother had told her ten years before to say. "Oh, Mr. Burden, they say you're in politics, oh, it must be just fascinating!" . . .

"No, I'm not in politics," I said. "I've just got a job."

"Tell me about your job, Mr. Burden."

"I'm an office boy," I said.

Warren was a consummate professional, one of the most successful writers of his generation. Blotner records briskly and pleasurably the details of book contracts, print runs, word counts, foundation grants. All of this serves to give a vivid picture of Warren's professional life, enjoyable both to those of us who write for money and those who wonder how it is done. Of *World Enough and Time* (1950), Blotner reports: "By early July the novel was third on the bestseller list. Random House followed the first printing of thirty-seven thousand copies with ten thousand more three days after publication and kept the hardcover in print for the next twenty-four years."

Warren began as a poet and, after his ten novels, his literary criticism, his biographies of John Brown and Jefferson Davis, his social and political nonfiction books like the 1956 work *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*, he ended as a poet. In his early work he brought the poise and learning of the Metaphysicals, whom T. S. Eliot was resurrecting from the nineteenth century's neglect, to the backwoods landscape, water moccasins, and lurking violence of his native South. Here is the last stanza of "Pondy Woods," published in 1942:

In Pondy Woods in the summer's drouth
Lurk fever and the cottonmouth.
And buzzards over Pondy Woods
Achieve the blue tense altitudes,
Drifting high in the pure sunshine
Till the sun in gold decline;
Then golden and hieratic through
The night their eyes burn two by two.

You will seldom encounter a "hieratic" buzzard elsewhere, unless perhaps in the work of Warren's older colleague Allen Tate. Southern literature in this century, with Faulkner's latinate periods and Ransom's elegant stanzas, was a place where classical learning met rural plainness in the aftermath of tragic historical events. A great literature grew out of this moment of supreme irony, when the Old South, with its Greek Revival mansions and African slaves, the storied

valor of its Confederate army in the proximate past, stood silhouetted against the violent and corrupt present of the Ku Klux Klan, Mr. Crump of Memphis, and Huey P. Long of Louisiana—with Martin Luther King, Kmart, and Bill Clinton in its not too distant future.

During the last twenty years of his life Warren returned more and more to poetry, spurred to some extent, Blotner suggests, by the disappointing critical response to his fiction. In doing so the Kentucky-born Warren, who had spent most of his adult life in Connecticut, Italy, and Vermont, was completing the circle of his life as a writer. The poetry from his *Selected Poems: New and Old* in 1966 to his *New and Selected Poems* in 1985 represents an autumnal flowering rare in any career and reminiscent of the late poetry of Hardy and Yeats. Part of the solidity and resonance of late Warren springs from his full acknowledgment of his grounding in the past, as in “Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky”:

Strange, into the past I first grew. I handled
the old bullet-mold.
I drew out a saber, touched an old bayonet,
I dreamed
Of the death-scream. Old spurs I tried on.
The first great General Jackson had ridden
just north to our state
To make a duel legal—or avoid the law.
It was all for honor. He said: “I would have
killed him
Even with his hot lead in my heart.” This for
honor. I longed
To understand. I said the magic word.
I longed to say it aloud.

In these miraculous late poems, Warren breathed truth into the cliché “an American original.” His vision was intensely historical, because he knew and pondered the American legacy with a rare seriousness. His poetic line carried the ebullient confidence of Whitman underpinned by the dark vision of Faulkner. His sinewy free verse had been prepared for by hard hours learning the discipline of rhyme, meter, and the stanza as

well as the fluidity gained from writing hundreds of thousands of words of prose.

Typical emblems from these poems are the hawk (“Look! Look! he is climbing the last light/ Who knows neither Time nor error, and under/ Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings/ Into shadow”) and the lone man gazing up at the stars (“Can I see Arcturus from where I stand?”). One comes away from a consideration of Warren’s life and work, transparently and convincingly presented in Joseph Blotner’s biography, with a sense of having been in the presence of largeness, ardor, seriousness, and “the possibility of joy in the world’s tangled and hieroglyphic beauty.”

Empson’s only heir?

Christopher Ricks Essays
in Appreciation. Oxford University
Press, 363 pages, \$29.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

“For some of us, the most brutal hatred within the acronym DWEM is not the racism of White or the sexism of Male but the embittered provincialism which makes Dead a term of abuse.” This, from the concluding essay in Professor Ricks’s new collection,¹ is both a heartening statement of principle and a pointer to one of his central concerns. Making literature live for us, he says emphatically, is not a matter of making it “relevant” to us, but of making *us* relevant to *it*. Matthew Arnold warned against what he called the historic fallacy, the assumption that because a work is a linguistic or literary milestone it is therefore good; but he also asserted, in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864), the need for criticism to concern itself with the best litera-

¹ Ricks’s essay “What Is at Stake in the ‘Battle of the Books?’” first appeared in *The New Criterion* (September 1989) and is accordingly left out of account in this review.

ture of past ages, not to be obsessed by modishness. Echoing both Arnold's title and sentiments, T. S. Eliot added in his "The Function of Criticism" (1923) that "a critic must have a very highly developed sense of fact."

Contemporary "wisdom" feels itself to be superior to this, denying the existence of facts and ignoring, or at best condescending to, the historical development of literary forms and aesthetic concepts. Professor Ricks cites a colleague of his whose proposals for a graduate course entitled "Introduction to Literary Study" gave pride of place to literary theory, adding almost as an afterthought, "plus a couple of weeks for the old verities." Well, the old verities have kept Ricks busy for over thirty years now, and they have not finished with him yet. He equips us, as he has equipped himself, to respond to the past as those for whom it was the present might have done. He knows that literature lives, among other locations, in the interstices of allusion, quotation, echo, and biographical encounter (whether a meeting of persons or minds)—all matters of fact, not speculation.

One essay in the collection, "The Wit and Weight of Clarendon," is devoted to a historian, and it well brings out the relationship between fact and interpretation. Clarendon's judgments are conveyed as much through cadence and wordplay as through explicit verdict, his narrative is a creative reenactment of the kind specified by R. G. Collingwood as the highest form of historical thinking. (It is disconcerting to find him omitted entirely from Collingwood's *The Idea of History*.) Yet it would be unsubtle—worse, it would be wrong—to say that Clarendon, or any other historian, is a novelist by another name. History, like criticism and unlike the novel, is second-order writing, though no less important for that; but, whereas the critic's data are ever available in the form of printed texts, the historian's are gone forever. We can't have another English Civil War, to see who is right about the causes. What we can have is another reading of Clarendon.

Ricks's ear for allusions is unrivaled, and his tempting case that Hardy's poem "A Spellbound Palace" borrows from Eliot's "Sweeney Erect" is only the most startling of the juxtapositions he offers. Not that he is gullible; he enumerates the factual blunders of creative artists in his lecture "Literature and the Matter of Fact," insisting that to notice, and be troubled by, such errors is not mere pedantry. (Tennyson was honorably exasperated to discover that the initial reports in the *London Times*, which gave him his figure of six hundred for "The Charge of the Light Brigade," were apparently based on underestimates.) Sometimes, it is true, his allusion-hunting becomes a verbal tic, and expends itself unprofitably. The least satisfactory essay here, on the literary borrowings of the philosopher J. L. Austin, significantly focuses on a writer who resembles Ricks at his exhibitionistic worst, when he is trying to out-Empson Empson but only succeeds in reproducing William Empson's cleverness without his intelligence. Ricks perhaps ought to be more guarded about Austin, whose *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) with its imperfectly formulated ideas and smart-aleck manner, has been responsible for the content and tone of much of the kind of criticism which, in other moods, he detests.

To adapt Johnson on Shakespeare, Ricks is sometimes great, when some great occasion is presented to him. The invitation to deliver the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1991 was one such occasion, and the lectures, hitherto unpublished, form the core of this volume. They take as their subject Victorian biography, exemplified by that fashionably relegated genre *Life and Letters*, of which Ricks is a vigorous defender. It is, he says, "uniquely imaginative in its variety of textures and of metabolism," and he is a firm opponent of the current dogma that, in biography, "all we do is impose ourselves, as upon everything else; all biographies are fictions, since everything is a fiction; and all biographies are autobiographies." Nowadays, when, at

least in Britain, biography outsells every other genre, except perhaps fiction, by a long way, we need reminding frequently that those are gross fallacies. All biographies are interpretations of facts—as, indeed, are all autobiographies—but that there are facts to interpret no one, except an academic in search of a career, would deny.

The lives of Charlotte Brontë by E. C. Gaskell, of Jane and Thomas Carlyle by J. A. Froude, and of Tennyson by his son Hallam and his grandson Charles, are studied by Ricks with the kind of tenacious attentiveness to detail most critics normally reserve for poems. Inverting the Poundian aphorism, he remarks in another essay that “Prose should be at least as well written as poetry,” and he shows that it can be, indeed that it can aspire to the poetic without divagating into the prose-poetic. He identifies a master-motif in each biography—disappointment in Gaskell’s Brontë, remorse and repentance in Froude’s Carlyle, and parent-child inheritance in Tennyson’s Tennyson—and traces its development illuminatingly, justifying his contention that these apparently ramshackle structures are in fact works of art. They are out of fashion now, not only because they are forbiddingly long, not only because they are informed by unpopular virtues, listed by Ricks as “affection, generosity, sympathy, and imagination,” but also because they make an assumption which almost no modern critic can make: that religion matters.

As Ricks says, Charlotte Brontë’s disappointment, like Gaskell’s account of it, can only be truly understood in the light of their beliefs about divine *appointment* (Carlyle and Tennyson, while idiosyncratic in belief, would have been outraged at the charge that they were devoid of it). Ricks doesn’t reveal his own religious position, if any, and there’s no reason why he should, but he is clear about the need to understand “the indisputable distinction between the entertaining of a belief and the holding of one.” This goes with his lethal aside, in an essay on Donne, that that archentertainer John Carey is “quite unperturbed by re-

ligion,” which would seem to incapacitate him pretty comprehensively as a commentator on the man who wrote “Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.”

As we might expect, the lecture on “Tennyson’s Tennyson” is the finest. Which Tennyson is which in that title? This is exactly Ricks’s point. The son was able to shape the life, and the *Life*, of his father (we can say this without denying the existence of biographical facts, as above), and if at times Hallam seems overwhelmed, not to say effaced, by his father’s literary progeny, the biography is his reestablishment of the equilibrium. He was far from being the compliant and colorless Telemachus-figure he is often taken to be. Tennyson was lucky in this son, the only one of three who survived him. Lucky in another sense, too; for, in this same essay, Ricks gives a list of great writers who were childless: Carlyle, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Samuel Beckett. It is a striking fact, and in two reprinted pieces he considers its implications for Jane Austen and George Eliot, both of whom saw their fictions as children.

Austen’s novels are not as devoid of children as many believe, but, Ricks thinks, they are astringent about them as a corrective to an overly sentimental or idealized view; while George Eliot’s childlessness (a conscious decision, since she and G. H. Lewes practiced contraception) is presented as a major impulsion behind her late launch into creative writing. Here Ricks is up against the feminists who are anxious to enlist Austen and Eliot as sisters in the campaign against the male plot to curb women’s freedom. He makes merry at the expense of his principal opponent, Nina Auerbach (“somebody else has to have babies, if only to keep up the supply of feminists”), but he is unwaveringly serious in his opposition to a slick politicized reading of these writers. “George Eliot, in her life with Lewes,” he adds forcefully, “manifested incomparably more courage in confronting slanderous social and sexual spite than is asked of any

late-twentieth-century feminist professor." Furthermore, the artist who imagined the tragic futility, born of desperation, of Hetty Sorrel's infanticide needs no lectures on patriarchy.

This volume prompts some general reflections about Ricks's career. His output has been impressive in bulk and variety, but his versatility has been a curse as well as a blessing. His editorial labors on Tennyson and, more recently, T. S. Eliot show how exquisitely tuned his ear can be; but his criticism seemed to me to lose its way badly about the time of the publication of that embarrassing book *Keats and Embarrassment* (1974). His previous collection of essays, *The Force of Poetry* (1984), and his previous full-length book *Beckett's Dying Words* (1993) were both badly marred by showing off and by superficiality taking itself for profundity. However, it must not be forgotten that he resigned his Cambridge chair after a row with the literary theorists, only to bump into them again at Boston University; and it would seem that his disagreements with them have recently made a more genuine impact on his conscience and sense of duty. There are some deeply felt, stern rebukes in several essays here to fellow members of what he reminds us is only the "profession" of university teacher, as distinct from the "calling" of the creative artist.

He laments, too, that academia has paid "the price paid for all professionalism: an induration against its own central human imperatives." "Whereas there is no such

thing as philosophical study distinct from philosophy," Ricks points out, "there is such a thing as literature, which should not be confused with—or by—literary studies." In "Literary Principles as Against Theory," Ricks has recourse to T. S. Eliot's gloss on "intelligence," "of which an important function is the discernment of exactly what, and how much, we feel in any given situation." Nowadays, when academic criticism (and teaching) is awash with emotional falsity, a hunger for totems, and a terror of seriousness, we should take Eliot's words to such hearts as we can muster.

In the final essay in the collection (again previously unpublished), Ricks condemns, with a severity unprecedented in his work, "the insolently mendacious misrepresentation not only of the great works of Western literature but of the responses they received over the centuries" from our academic Thought Police. Such individuals are baffled by, and hence hate and fear, the idea that reading literature sharpens our judgment because it forces us to try to understand points of view other than our own. William Empson, who figures in this essay and frequently elsewhere, rejoiced in this enabling, and ennobling, discipline, and Ricks (who for better or worse is Empson's only authentic successor), when he is being intellectually continent, shares and transmits that joy. *Essays in Appreciation* shows—and I don't intend to be patronizing in saying this, rather the reverse—that Ricks, until now the oldest *enfant terrible* in the business, is growing up.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of *Since the Noon Mail Stopped*, by Wyatt Prunty (Johns Hopkins, \$16.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Letters

Who was David Stove?

To the Editor:

Regarding Roger Kimball's article "Who Was David Stove?" (March 1997): as Kimball does not take Stove as a reliable guide to Plato, why is he so confident of Stove as a guide to Karl Popper? Popper was certainly no irrationalist; nor was Imre Lakatos; nor was Thomas Kuhn.

Judging by Kimball's essay, there are two grounds on which these three are suspected of irrationalism. One is that they attacked a rather narrow conception of rationality (subscribed to by Stove). They thought they had a broader, better, more defensible conception of rationality. Perhaps they were mistaken (I think they were not), but that hardly makes them irrationalists. Take Popper's argument that theoretical ideas are conjectural rather than abstracted from the phenomena they are introduced to explain. Popper is guilty of overstatement, simplification, etc. Even so, it is not irrationalist to maintain that scientists seek to refute these conjectures and that the theories that survive are not proven but are merely yet to be refuted. For this is consistent with saying, as Popper also said, that the process yields increasingly better ("more highly corroborated") theories. In fact, Popper's view has been received more sympathetically by scientists than has any other philosophy of science.

The other ground is that some of their disciples took their ideas to ridiculous lengths. But *that proves nothing*. You can't blame Julia Child because some crazy chef ruins the soup by put-

ting in double the pepper she recommended. Popper's enmity toward his erstwhile student Feyerabend, who delighted in going to zany extremes, is famous. Sadly, Kuhn never repudiated the feminists and left-wing sociologists of science who misuse and distort his ideas. Yet, in response to charges that he was a subjectivist, he persistently proclaimed that in his view science enjoys cumulative growth in empirical adequacy or usefulness; that changes in theory, while not amounting to a cumulative growth in knowledge, nevertheless do represent objective improvements in knowledge (albeit in a manner he never succeeded in specifying); and that scientific inquiry, while not composed of purely logical steps taken daintily one at a time, is in a larger perspective rational.

Difficult questions have been raised about how science manages to add to our objective knowledge of nature. The lack of generally agreed upon answers to these questions is what keeps philosophers of science in business. That does not prove that objectivity is a myth or that these philosophers think it is. Look at it this way: if the success of modern science is easy to understand, then why did it take so long for mankind to catch on to how to do science? Science is exciting partly at a philosophical level, because every major advance in scientific knowledge is also a discovery of new and better methods. More than that: Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and the quantum revolution each changed what *counts* as understanding nature. It does not follow that these changes were irrational, simply because they cannot be rational-

ized according to some simplistic empiricist theory of scientific method.

One last observation. It is ironic that the campus Left has espoused relativism, subjectivism, and irrationalism. For a radical, more than anyone, must lay claim to objective truth. If everything's relative, who is going to mount the barricades, risking all for a new and better world? The campus Left is just playing a game, at public expense; it is undermining our culture but has no practical agenda—none that extends beyond securing jobs for itself in the academy. Any radical who is serious—Alan Sokal may be one of the few of that species extant—must hate and despise this ersatz Left. By the same token, however, it is ironic that so many conservatives are allowing themselves to sound like dogmatism's last and most resolute defenders. If the Left is now foolish enough to espouse irrationalism, is that any reason why we should lurch to the opposite extreme? To be sure, we believe in an objective reality, including an objective moral order. But we should not claim to possess some gnostic access to truth. There's nothing in Popper's emphasis on the fragility of theories to upset *our* apple cart.

A sense of humility, of human limitations, cognitive as well as moral, is what distinguishes the conservative from the ideologue. That is why we seek the guidance of tradition, history, revealed religion, and other things that we do not perfectly understand; it is why we prefer the cumulative judgment of the marketplace to central planning; and it is why we counsel prudence and piecemeal reforms as opposed to grand utopian schemes. Kuhn's theory featured such factors internal to science as its traditions, its social organization, and the not-fully-articulable lessons of experience. These, he claimed, play crucial roles in the progress of inquiry. That differentiates his view from Popper's; it also makes Kuhn's theory conservative. The conservative thrust of Kuhn's philosophy has gone unnoticed, at conservatism's cost. To reflexively denigrate those whom the Left, in its presently debased condition, praise, is a big mistake.

Thomas Short
Titusville, N.J.

Roger Kimball replies:

Was Karl Popper's philosophy of science irrationalist? At the center of Popper's thought is a profound skepticism, derived from Hume, about the rationality of inductive reasoning. ("I agree with Hume's opinion," Popper wrote, "that induction is invalid and in no sense justified.") In other words, he believed that no proposition about the observed can be a reason to believe a contingent proposition about the unobserved.

What does this mean? The great empirical tradition of modern science holds that we have no reason to believe anything about the unobserved prior to experience. Popper, following Hume, goes one step further and announces that we have no reason to believe anything about the unobserved even *after* experience. "Belief," as Popper put it, "is never rational. It is rational to suspend belief." This would mean, for example, that the fact that a lighted match burned you yesterday is at bottom no reason to believe that a lighted match will do the same tomorrow. Is *that* rational?

David Stove goes deeply into the problem of induction and the question of what counts as a reason to believe a given theory or proposition. Along the way, he shows that Popper's rejection of inductive reasoning stands behind his famous theory about "falsifiability." What was novel here was not Popper's idea that negative instances disconfirm or "falsify" a theory. The fact that the proposition "All ravens are black" is disconfirmed by the appearance of a white raven is a hoary logical truism. What was novel was the amazing thought that positive instances do not—in principle *cannot*—act to confirm a proposition or theory. For Popper, if every raven anyone has ever seen is black, that fact gives no rational support for the belief that all ravens are in fact black. *Ipse dicit*: "There *are* no such things as good positive reasons" to believe any scientific theory. Consequently, "a universal law can never be supported, or corroborated, or confirmed by empirical evidence." He goes even further: of two hypotheses "the one which can be *better corroborated*, is always *less probable*." Whatever else these statements may be, they are breathtakingly irrationalist. Bertrand Russell was quite right that "the growth of unreason throughout the nineteenth century and what has passed of the

twentieth is a natural sequel to Hume's destruction of empiricism."

Popper was in a peculiar position. He believed that the aim of science is to discover true laws or theories. But he also believed that this was impossible. Indeed, this tension was an important source of his appeal. He wrote *as if* he believed in the project of science. And this—together with the enormous logical machinery he habitually deployed in his writing—helps to explain why he is widely believed (e.g., by Thomas Short) to be an opponent of irrationalism. After all, his magnum opus in its English translation is called *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*: what could be more promising? But for Popper it always turned out that logic was incurably impotent when it came to scientific discovery. Thus it is that he repeatedly insisted that "we must regard *all laws or theories* . . . as guesses." "To guess," as the *O.E.D.* reminds us, is to form an opinion or hypothesis "at random" or in the absence of evidence. Is this the basis upon which what Popper elsewhere calls "the soaring edifice of science" has been built: conjectures formulated "at random"? No wonder Stove suggested that a better title for Popper's book would have been *The "Logic" of Scientific "Discovery."*

Imre Lakatos, who succeeded Popper as Professor of Logic and Scientific Method at the University of London, also followed him down the irrationalist garden path. "If a theory is refuted," Lakatos tells us in one characteristic passage, "it is not necessarily false." What can this mean? While readers ponder the vertiginous implications of this conditional statement, I will pass to Mr. Short's main hero: Thomas Kuhn.

It would of course be nice if Kuhn were himself exempt from the irrationalism and subjectivism that his myriad followers have celebrated and embraced. But he is not. Kuhn "never repudiated" the academic radicals who appropriated his ideas because, when it came to epistemology, he was, at bottom, one of them. It is true that he was not *the worst*. As far as I know, for example, he never suggested that the laws of science, like political laws, ought to be put to the vote, as did Paul Feyerabend. But Kuhn's philosophy of science offered his irrationalist followers plenty of fodder.

David Stove shows this in meticulous, devas-

tating detail. Above all he shows that Kuhn rejects the idea that science is cumulative, e.g., that we know more now than we did one hundred years ago. To be sure, Kuhn occasionally waffles about this (one sure sign of an upcoming waffle is when Kuhn starts talking about science as a method for "solving puzzles"). But in fact such rejection is at the very heart of Kuhn's famous theory of "paradigm change" and, more broadly, his effort to subordinate the logic of science to the history of science.

Arguing this is the primary burden of Kuhn's celebrated book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. If the traditional view of science as cumulative were true, Kuhn noted, then "in the evolution of science new knowledge would replace ignorance rather than replace knowledge of another and incompatible sort." (The notion of "incompatible knowledge," by the way, is a classic Kuhnian weasel; as Stove notes, "knowledge implies truth, and truths cannot be incompatible with one another.") Kuhn insists that we must "relinquish" such a naïve view. For him, the idea that "changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth" is all wrong. In other words, Kuhn wishes to speak of scientific knowledge and discovery without the impediments of truth and falsity—without, in Mr. Short's phrase, "objective improvements in knowledge."

The fundamental irrationalism of Kuhn's philosophy of science is highlighted by his repeated insistence that scientific truth is "paradigm relative." According to Kuhn, in its heyday every discarded scientific theory once possessed "the full integrity of what we now call sound scientific truth." To illustrate this, he asks "what mistake was made, what rule broken, when and by whom, in arriving at, say, the Ptolemaic system?" For most people, Stove points out, this is not a difficult question. For starters there was the mistake of believing that the sun goes around the earth every day. But Kuhn, impatient with the idea that "successive theories grow ever closer to . . . the truth," professes to find it "difficult to understand" what it might mean to call "that system, or any other out-of-date theory, a mistake." As Stove observes, "You have to be very learned indeed to find things as hard to understand as Kuhn does."

I am of course grateful for Mr. Short's little sermon about what it means to be conservative. I might, however, have wished that he took his own admonitions about "humility," "human limitations," and reflexive denigration more to heart. In any event, he is wrong about Popper's philosophy of science not upsetting his conservative apple cart; ditto about Imre Lakatos; and when it comes to Thomas Kuhn, Mr. Short will discover that the only thing left is applause.

Joseph Epstein: an open letter

As Phi Beta Kappa struggles to redefine itself and to remain vigorous during times of great change and upheaval, its leaders in the senate of PBK have blundered mightily in dismissing Joseph Epstein as editor of *The American Scholar*.

Charles Blitzer, president of PBK, is quoted in the organization's newsletter, the *Key Reporter* (Fall 1996), as saying that "22 years is quite a long time and that periodic changes of editors could bring new points of view and fresh ideas to the *Scholar*." In fact, new perspectives are precisely what Mr. Epstein has brought to the magazine throughout his distinguished editorship. Not only has he published a remarkably wide range of essays and reviews, but he has also published a remarkably wide range of writers. Mr. Epstein's great feat is to have edited a literary magazine that is at once lively, intelligent, and immensely readable. This is the reason that *The American Scholar*, under Mr. Epstein's leadership has appealed to the informed and literate general reader as well as to specialists. In dispensing with Mr. Epstein's services, PBK is certain to be trading intelligent readability for the various kinds of ideological axe-grinding that distorts so many academic journals today.

Mr. Blitzer goes on to compare Hiram Haydn and Joseph Epstein, thus showing his ignorance of both men's accomplishments. Haydn edited the *Scholar* for a very long time, always with the left hand, seldom achieving more than an acceptable level of mediocrity. For the last five years and more of his editorship, Haydn was just going through the motions, putting his work at Atheneum (which he helped to found) ahead of his magazine. Mr. Epstein, in sharp contrast, has always edited the *Scholar* brilliantly, regardless of

his other obligations and of his health. He has shown himself to be the best familiar essayist in the United States and one of our best literary critics. He is also an excellent writer of short fiction. As a writer, Mr. Haydn never possessed Mr. Epstein's literary distinction and was most accomplished as an editor of books, especially novels, rather than as a magazine editor.

Joseph Epstein has produced not only a superbly edited quarterly in *The American Scholar* but some of the best personal essays now published in English (under his pen name Aristides). The people who have criticized him and finally succeeded in having him dismissed should be ashamed of themselves. Few people in publishing could rival Joseph Epstein as editor or author; we certainly have no reason to suppose that his appointed successor, Anne Fadiman, is likely to achieve such distinction.

"New points of view and fresh ideas" guarantee nothing but a hazard of new fortunes, and this one may well prove to be disastrous. In any case, the literary and cultural historians of the future will agree that Joseph Epstein's departure from *The American Scholar* is a calamity for American letters.

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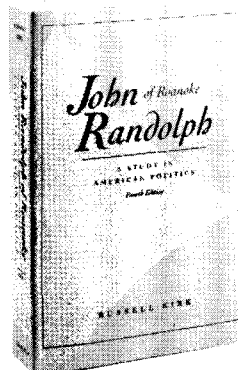
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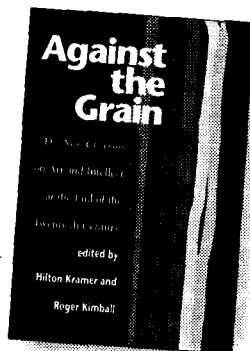
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